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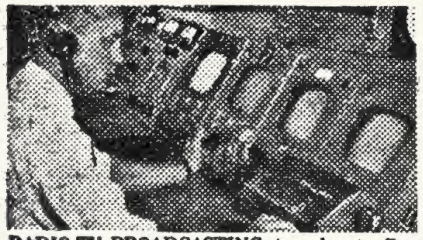

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TOP WESTERN FICTION ANNUAL

VOL. 3, NO. 3 A THRILLING PUBLICATION 1958 EDITION

A Complete Novel

LOST MOUNTAIN . . . . . **Louis L'Amour** **14**
The Wild Bunch gave young Riley Branam a chance to get out of the game, but he soon found that an owlhoot past throws long and deadly shadows

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JIM HENDRYX, JR., *Editor*

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MAYBE YOUSE DON'T TALK LIKE THIS, BUT-

—are you *sure* you don't make other, less glaring mistakes in English which can cause people to misjudge your true ability and educational background?

So many people do have "pet mistakes" in English of which they are completely unaware. For example, some use such expressions as "Leave them lay there" and "Mary was invited as well as myself." Still others say "between you and I" instead of "between you and me." It is astonishing how often "who" is used for "whom", and how frequently we hear such glaring mispronunciations as "for MID able," "ave NOO," and "in-com-PARE able." Few know whether to spell certain words with one or two "c's" or "m's" or "r's" or with "ie" or "ei," and when to use commas in order to make their meaning absolutely clear. Most persons use only common words—colorless, flat, ordinary. Their speech and their letters are lifeless, monotonous, humdrum.

Why Most People Make Mistakes

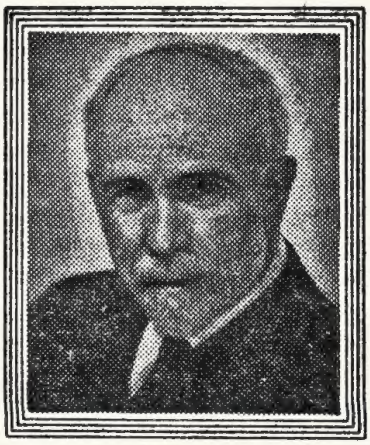
What is the reason so many of us are deficient in the use of English and find our careers stunted in consequence? Why is it some cannot spell correctly and others cannot punctuate? Why do so many find themselves at a loss for words to express their meaning adequately? The reason for the deficiency is clear. Sherwin Cody discovered it in scientific tests, which he gave thousands of times. *Most persons do not write and speak good English simply because they never formed the habit of doing so.*

What Cody Did at Gary

The formation of any habit comes only from constant practice. Shakespeare, you may be sure, never studied rules. No one who writes and speaks correctly thinks of *rules* when he is doing so.

Here is our mother-tongue, a language that has built up our civilization, and without which we would all still be muttering savages! Yet some schools, by wrong methods, have made it a study to be avoided—the hardest of tasks instead of the most fascinating of games! For years it has been a crying disgrace.

In that point lies the real difference between Sherwin Cody and these schools! Here is an illustration: Some time ago Mr. Cody was invited by the author of the famous Gary System of Education to teach English to all



SHERWIN CODY

upper-grade pupils in Gary, Indiana. By means of unique practice exercises, *Mr. Cody secured more improvement in these pupils in five weeks than previously had been obtaind by similar pupils in two years under old methods.* There was no guesswork about these results. They were proved by scientific comparisons. Amazing as this improvement was, more interesting still was the fact that the children were "wild" about the study. It was like playing a game!

The basic principle of Mr. Cody's method is habit-forming. Anyone can learn to write and speak correctly by constantly using the correct forms. But how is one to know in each case what is correct? Mr. Cody solves this problem in a simple, unique, sensible way.

100% Self-Correcting Device

Supose he himself were standing forever at your elbow. Every time you mispronounced or misspelled a word, every time you violated correct grammatical usage, every time you used the wrong word to express what you meant, suppose you could hear him whisper: "That is wrong, it should be thus and so." In a short time you would habitually use the correct form and the right words in speaking and writing.

If you continued to make the same mistakes over and over again, each time patiently he would tell you what was right. He would, as it were, be an everlasting mentor beside you — a mentor who would not laugh at you, but who would, on the contrary, support and help you. The 100% Self-Correcting Device does exactly this. It is Mr. Cody's silent voice behind you, ready to speak out whenever you commit an error. It finds your mistakes and concentrates on them. You do not need to study anything you already know. There are no rules to memorize.

Only 15 Minutes a Day

When the study of English is made so simple it becomes clear that progress can be made in a very short time. *No more than fifteen minutes a day is required.* Fifteen minutes, not of study, but of fascinating practice! Students of Mr. Cody's method do their work in any spare moment they can snatch. They do it riding to work, or at home. They take fifteen minutes from time usually spent in profitless reading or amusement. The results are phenomenal.

Free — Book on English

It is impossible in this brief review, to give more than a suggestion of the range of subjects covered by Mr. Cody's method and of what his practice exercises consist. But those who are interested can find a detailed description in a fascinating little book called "How You Can Master Good English in 15 Minutes a Day." This book is published by the Sherwin Cody Course in English in Port Washington, N. Y. It can be had by anyone, free, upon request. There is no obligation involved in writing for it. The book is more than a prospectus. Unquestionably it tells one of the most interesting stories about education in English ever written.

If you are interested in learning more in detail of what Sherwin Cody's method can do for you, send for the book, "How You Can Master Good English in 15 Minutes a Day."

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The Fabulous Donkey

By ADRIAN ANDERSON

JUDGED solely by his scrawny, flea-bitten exterior, old Pete was only a lazy, sleepy little jackass. But to his owner, crafty old Tom Canfield, hunting guide par excellence, the critter was a world-beater.

On the trail to the game-rich country of Kootenai, Tom described Pete to the latest Eastern dandy he was guiding. "Mister, this ain't no ordinary jackass. He's a game-spotter. He can smell out a critter a mile off, then just watch him! When he spots a buck deer he drops down on his knees just once. When he drops twice that means a bull elk. But when he drops down three times, brother, that means a caribou!"

The dude snorted his disbelief and started to speak, but Tom shushed him to silence. And without warning, the donkey dropped to his knees.

"Great guns!" the dude cried. "That must be a buck!"

It was, and, with Tom's counsel, the Eastern dude brought him down.

"Tom!" the dude yelled. "I've just got to have that jackass! I want to take him back East with me!"

"All the money in the world couldn't buy that critter!" Tom loyally declared.

At the top of the next hill, Pete came down again. This time it was a bull elk. The tenderfoot, again coached by the guide, laid the critter low.

"Tom!" he yelled. "What will you take for him? Just name your price!"

"He ain't for sale!" Tom snorted, shutting off all further palaver.

On the trail the next morning, Pete again dropped on his knees. This time he went down three times! A caribou! Under the whispered coaching of the old guide the dude bagged the great prize.

The dude went crazy. "Sell him to me, Tom!" he cried. "Sell him to me!"

"Friend," Tom observed, "you're mighty set on that jackass, ain't you?"

"Just name your price!" the dude cried.

Tom thought a minute. "How about three hundred dollars?"

"Get off and let me get on him," the Easterner cried.

The men exchanged mounts, and Tom pocketed the money.

Later, while fording a river, the tenderfoot, in an effort to keep his feet clear of the stream, raised his heels and touched the donkey on the flanks. True to his training, old Pete dropped upon his knees, half submerging his rider in the waters of the little river. It had been by this pressure on the side of the little donkey that old Tom had brought the animal to his knees whenever he discovered the presence of game.

"Heavens! What does he see now?" the tenderfoot cried, glancing wildly about for the sight of at least a bull elk or a caribou, and with the look of a man who half-hoped, half-feared it would maybe be a female grizzly bear in ill humor.

"I can't tell you," Tom chuckled, "unless he sees a sucker. He reached out, grabbed the donkey's hackamore rope and put his weight on it. "Get up there, old Pete! Don't you know you're headed for the glorious East?"

"I call it a bad day if I don't make $25 before noon"

(This chair alone brought $4.50 with twenty-five minutes work and 32¢ in cleaning materials.)

by Harold Holmes

"Just a few months ago I made the big move. I gave up my job and started spending all my time in the little business I had been running on the side. It wasn't an easy decision, but, now I'm tickled to death I made it. Not just because I'm my own boss or because I have an excellent chance of making over $10,000 this year. It goes deeper than that.

"You see, this idea has caught on like wildfire in my town. Not a day goes by without my phone ringing with women calling for appointments. The beauty of it is that once a woman becomes my customer, she calls back year after year. Not only that, she tells her friends, too, and they call me. Before I know it I'm swamped with work. (And at $7.50 an hour net profit it doesn't take long before my bank account is really mushrooming.)

"Funny thing, but back last year, before I started, I never realized the money there was in this business waiting for someone to come along and collect it. Just think: every house in town has furniture and most have rugs or carpeting. I concentrate on just the better homes and have more work than I can handle. You know why? Because women are fussy about their furnishings. Can't stand to see them dirty. That's why they call me over every year.

"The average job is worth $25.00 to me and takes a little over 2 hours. Out of this, after paying for materials, advertising and other expenses I net about $15.00 clear profit. This means I need just 3 jobs a day to clear $11,250.00 in a year. Frankly, since this will be my first full-time year I'll be glad to hit the $10,000 mark. But after that this business should grow larger each year until I have to hire men to help me handle the business.

Personally Trained by Another Dealer

"Believe me there's nothing magic about it. I didn't know a thing about cleaning and mothproofing before I became a Duraclean dealer. But after my application was accepted I was trained right here in town by a successful dealer from another city. I was astonished by the short time it took me to become an expert. Actually, much of the credit must go to the Duraclean process, which is so safe it has earned the Parents' Magazine Seal.

"The portable machine you see is just one of the electrical machines I use. It manufactures a light aerated foam with a peculiar action chemists call 'peptizing'. It means that instead of being scrubbed deep into the fabric, dirt is gently ABSORBED by the foam, leaving the fabric clean all the way down. Women can't believe their eyes when they see how it works. Colors appear bright again, and rug pile unmats and rises like new. I don't have to soak rugs or upholstery to get them clean, which ends the problem of shrinkage, and means the furnishings can be used again the very same day. This alone has brought me a lot of customers.

"As a Duraclean dealer I make money with two other services, too: **Duraproof** . . . which makes furnishings immune to moth and carpet beetle damage (it's backed by a six year warranty) and **Durashield**, a brand new dirt-delaying treatment. It coats fabrics with an invisible film that keeps dirt out. On jobs where I perform all three services, I make a triple profit!

"One of the nicest things about being a Duraclean dealer is that every month I get help from Duraclean Headquarters. My services are nationally-advertised in famous magazines like McCall's, House Beautiful and many others. I also get a complete advertising kit prepared by experts. (There's even a musical commercial!) I get a monthly magazine full of methods to build business and I can meet with other dealers at Duraclean conventions. I'm also backed by insurance. In fact there are over 25 regular services I get under their unique System.

No Shop Needed

"Maybe you too would like to break away from your job and make a fresh start in a business of your own. Do you need a shop? Certainly not. I operate from home. Need a lot of money to start? Not at all. Duraclean finances reliable men, after a moderate down payment, and furnishes enough supplies to return your TOTAL investment.

"You get everything you need: equipment, supplies, advertising matter, personal training, and regular help from Headquarters. To get all the details, fill out the coupon. There's no obligation and you can decide for yourself. I'll say one thing: if you DO become a Duraclean dealer, you'll be glad the rest of your life that you took time today to write."

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The Cheat

Was old Matt's son a tinhorn or a man to ride the river with?

By

William L. Jackson

WE WERE waiting our turn for the Red River Crossing. The herd was milling peacefully, and the early-rising sun turned the river into a clean, pink rope in the distance. I was riding herd next to a lad named Tommy Martin. Before the camp came awake we saw the boss, old Matt Bartels, and his foreman mount up and ride away from the chuckwagon.

"Where are they going at this hour?" young Martin asked.

I figured he had a right to know, having come all the way from San Antone with us. Besides, the memory, sharp as it was, sort of crowded me into talking. I told him the whole story, right from the beginning.

Sonny Bartels came into the bunkhouse that morning three years ago, still bleary-eyed from his night in town, and said, "Matt, I'm going along this trip. What have you got for me?"

"Why," his father said calmly, "I guess you could be a wrangler, if you think you could handle it." He was fed up with Sonny, his own boy, as much as any of us.

"Wrangler!"

"Yes, wrangler!" old Matt shouted. "You spend your time with the drink and cards until you don't know one end of a beef from the other. What did you expect to be—ramrod?"

Sonny took this in front of the crew without a whimper. "All right," he said, "I'll take it."

And take it he did, riding out with us two days later, surprising all of us by doing his job and having horses ready when we needed them. He got rope blisters on his hands and chafed under his collar, but he stuck with it.

(Continued on page 10)

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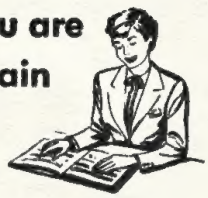
Learning to Play Music is Now Easy as A B C

A. First you are TOLD in plain English WHAT to do



B. Then a picture SHOWS you HOW

C. Then you PLAY it yourself -- and amaze your FAMILY and FRIENDS!

"Every Hour a Golden Hour"

"My husband arrived home yesterday from a long journey, not knowing I had been taking lessons. I sat down and played. When I got through, he said it was wonderful! Taking your lessons was the most sensible thing I ever did in my life. Every hour I spend at the piano is a golden hour. Thank you from the bottom of my heart!"
—Mrs. Mildred Fink, Cadwell, Ohio

PIANO, GUITAR, ACCORDION —ANY INSTRUMENT

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We were three weeks away from San Antone before he started to sluff off some.

He had a big Mexican coin in his pocket, and whenever a dirty little chore, such as scrounging fuel for Cooky's fire, came his way he dug that coin out of his pocket. He flipped the coin with the man whose turn at the chore was coming up next, and that man usually took Sonny's turn, too.

THE CREW soon got sick of it, and old Matt kept his eyes hard on Sonny and this shennanigan. One night in a drizzling rain it was someone's bad luck to have to ride backtrail for the coffee pot, which had somehow fallen off Cooky's wagon. Sonny stepped over near the fire to flip for the chore with Stan Dobbs, our drag rider. The coin made its spinning arc in the firelight, and Sonny won.

From across the sputtering fire old Matt's wire-thin voice said, "Let me see that coin!"

We all knew what Matt was suggesting, and the winning grin disappeared from Sonny's face leaving him looking absolutely trapped. He tossed the coin across the fire with all the defiance he could muster. Matt turned it in his hands and came to his feet, catlike for all his bigness. He threw the coin on the ground and scattered sparks from the fire in reaching his son.

His big, work-hardened hand left its harsh mark on Sonny's face, and he said, "Two heads! Not just a gambling man, but a cheat as well! Get your bedroll and go after that damn' pot."

Sonny rubbed his bruised face and looked at him as if to say, "The way you brought me up so soft, whose fault is this?" He retrieved the coin and jammed it into his pocket before he left, thoroughly miserable.

None of the crew expected him to come back, but back he was in the morning. He gave the coffee pot to Cooky, and he had nothing to say. For that matter, he had nothing to say for the next week or so. He found someone to talk with only when this kid of fifteen or so attached himself to the drive.

This youngster drifted in one evening after we had suffered through a particularly ornery day with the herd, and Matt asked him to sit to supper. His gear was worn, his clothes ragged, and he had all the markings of a trail orphan. He ate his supper and showed no inclination to leave. Finally Matt said, "What do you want, boy?"

"A riding job."

"A riding job!" Matt boomed, his voice dripping sarcasm. "What you need is a few more years in school and fifty more pounds to put in your saddle." He threw his acid glance across the fire at Sonny. "I don't need no more kids around here."

The boy stood up, more mad than discouraged. "All right," he said, half-yelling to match Matt's voice. "You don't have to be so ring-tailed about it. I just asked for a job. You don't have to rub it in."

"Whoa now," Matt said, and his eyes now belied his rough voice. "You can't leave here after talking to me like that." The kid started to open his mouth again, and Matt added, "How about wrangler's helper, fifteen a month and found?"

The kid looked at Matt as if the trail boss had just given him twenty head of cattle and a piece of range. "Where do I put my gear?" he said.

Matt nodded at Sonny. "Right next to our wrangler. What's your name, son?"

"Bill Darling," the boy answered.

Somebody across the fire snickered, and Matt threw this man a wrathful glance. "That's all of that," he said. "He works here now."

It was plain the next day that young Darling and Sonny Bartels were going to get along great together. Sonny let the kid help all he wanted, and

(Continued on page 12)

PUZZLE: FIND AL

Al's got himself lost in his job.

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Bill was pleased as punch. He thought Sonny was great, and nobody told him anything different.

We were getting near the Red, and the drive was going fine until two men took sick. Stan Dobbs came down with some kind of fever, and another man broke his leg and had to ride in the chuckwagon. Matt hated it, but he put the sick Dobbs on as wrangler and let Sonny and Darling ride herd.

They were on night herd when we bedded the cattle down by the Red River. It was a bad night, threatening to storm, and Matt would have asked someone else to ride if his regular riders hadn't been completely beat. No man removed his boots that night, and we all lay half awake in our blankets, listening to the roll of thunder and Sonny's singing to the herd.

ABOUT midnight the sky seemed to open and the lightning flashed against the clouds in brilliant, crackling streaks. The first warning came to us as a shifting of hoofs and rattle of horns, then the ground began to shake and every man hit his saddle under the lash of Matt's frustrated swearing. The lightning made day out of night again, and we saw the stampeding cattle in a roiling, tossing wave, headed straight for camp.

There was nothing to do but get out of their way. We took the injured man from the chuck wagon and broke from camp.

Then someone yelled, "They're turning! They're turning!"

We looked behind in the lightning's glare and saw why. There was a rider in front of them, low on his horse, swinging a coiled, wet rope at the lead steer's nose, forcing the herd into a circle which would soon start them milling. The rider was Sonny Bartels, and he was doing a job which a man didn't do for himself alone. He was doing this for old Matt.

Mercifully, the sky went dark when Sonny went down. The lightning flashed and he was there in front of them, and when it flashed again he was not. It was as stark and certain as that.

After they found him and put him to rest beside the river, the crew sat around a dead fire and drank cold and bitter coffee. Young Bill Darling was still white and shaken, and he said to the rider next to him. "And when I think, it's just blind luck that I'm not out there instead of him."

It wasn't meant for Matt's ears, but the old man heard him, and he said softly, "What do you mean, luck?"

"Well," Bill said, "when we rode out tonight Sonny said that the herd didn't look too steady. He said, 'If they run, we're going to turn 'em, you understand. One of us is going to swing wide and one of us is going to get their lead.' Then he said, 'We might as well settle who gets that job right now,' and he took a silver dollar out of his pocket and flipped it. He called tails, and he lost."

"He called tails!" Matt said. "He—"

The trail boss shoved himself to his feet and stamped out of the camp circle. He walked off toward the river, and he didn't come back until after sunup . . . .

"His grave is a mile from here," I said to Tommy Martin, and somehow I was almost ashamed of telling him. "Now you know where Matt and Bill Darling are going, and don't bother me any more."

KNOWLEDGE
THAT HAS
ENDURED WITH THE
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A NOVEL

Lost

Riley went down the rope and jerked the water-soaked man to his feet

Mountain

By LOUIS L'AMOUR

The Wild Bunch gave young Riley Branam a chance to get out of the game, but an owlhoot past throws long shadows . . .

I

WHEN Jim Colburn rode up to the camp at sundown he was not alone. There was a gangling kid with him, a kid with narrow hips and meatless shoulders and chest, and the old Navy .44 he wore on his leg looked too big for him despite his height.

Jim Colburn was a tough man, fit to ramrod a tough outfit. He swung down and looked around at Kehoe, Weaver, and Parrish.

"This here's Riley Branam," he said. "He's riding with us."

Parrish was stirring beans and he just looked up out of those slate-gray eyes and said nothing at all. Weaver started to say something, then turned away, but he looked angry. Kehoe looked at the kid, dropped his cigarette and nodded. "Howdy," he said.

They ate in silence, then the kid moved over to help Parrish clean up. No-

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body said anything until Colburn had a boot off, and then he said:

"I got myself in a corner." He jerked his head toward Riley. "He got me out of it."

At daybreak they moved out, four hard-bitten outlaws and a lean, raw-boned kid on a crowbait buckskin. Kehoe was lank and lazy-acting, Parrish stocky and silent, Weaver a brusque and angry man. Jim Colburn was the leader, the planner—and a good man with a gun. So were they all.

Weaver's irritation was obvious, but he said nothing until they stopped at the spring outside of town.

"Same as always," Colburn said. 'Parrish with the horses. Weaver, you and Kehoe come with me."

Weaver did not even look at Riley Branam. "What does *he* do?"

"He'll ride down by that big cottonwood and get down. He'll stand right there until we come by, and if there's shooting, he'll cover us."

"That'll take nerve."

Riley Branam's tone was even. "That's what I got," he said, looking at Weaver.

Weaver ignored him, but stepped into the leather. "You never been wrong yet," he said to Colburn, and then they rode.

It was clock-work. They rode in, and the kid rode on to the cottonwood. He swung down and he stood behind his horse looking down the street. All of a sudden Kehoe, Weaver, and Parrish came out of the bank door they'd entered and stepped into their saddles. Their horses started to move.

The banker rushed into the street with a rifle. The kid turned lazily with his Winchester in his hand and shot at the hitch-rail, in front of the man. Splinters flew, and the banker jumped back inside the door. The kid went into saddle and they all rode out of town.

THEY held to the trail for a mile, then turned into the desert, down a wash, doubled back, and then as they rode on the kid cut out and started a bunch of cattle over their tracks. They were in the brush, out of sight of pursuers.

At a stream he let the cattle go. They rode in and followed the stream a half-mile, then cut into the hills. Pursuit never came close.

The take had been small. Weaver looked irritated when an equal share was counted out to young Riley Branam.

In the next month they made two more strikes, and the take was equally small. Riley helped around camp, talked little. Parrish accepted him. Weaver was angered by him, Kehoe studied him. And Colburn shrewdly let things ride.

Loafing on the street at Bradshaw, watching the bank there, Weaver said suddenly, to Kehoe, "I had about enough of that kid. What did Jim ever bring him along for?"

Kehoe shrugged. "He ain't a bad kid. Leave him alone."

"Something about him gets on my nerves!" Weaver was angrier than usual. "And we don't need him."

"Don't you brace him," Kehoe advised quietly. "You'd get a shock."

"What you mean?"

Kehoe brushed the ash from his cigarette. "The kid's a gunslick."

"Him?" Weaver was contemptuous. "For two-bits, I'd —"

"He'd kill you, amigo. You wouldn't have a chance. I've been watching him. You watch and see. Nobody moves, he doesn't see them. He's like a cat when he moves, and he never gets his right hand tangled up. When he lifts anything, it's always with the left."

Twice, on the bank jobs, the kid had to shoot. Neither time did he kill. Each time he shot to frighten, and his bullets were close—very close. Weaver grudgingly accepted him, Parrish often rode beside him, but only to Kehoe did he ever talk.

When they were over the Border, the kid spent little money. Weaver

was usually broke within a few days, Parrish almost as soon, but Riley Branam drank little and never gambled.

Over there, one day, Weaver crawled out of his blankets with a headache and looked around. Parrish was cooking, Kehoe and Colburn were gone.

"I tied one on," Weaver said. "You got a drink?"

Parrish shook his head, but Riley turned to his blankets and pulled out a bottle. "Hair of the dog," he said, and tossed it to Weaver.

Weaver looked at him, then opened the bottle and drank. "Thanks, kid," he said.

"Keep it," Riley said. "The way you headed into it last night, I figured you could use it today."

He got into saddle and rode away. Weaver stared after him. "Maybe I had the kid wrong," he said.

"You did," Parrish said. "He's a good kid."

Weaver had another drink, then corked the bottle and put it away. He seemed to be thinking of what Parrish had said.

"That's the trouble," he said finally. "He is a good kid."

Parrish looked up, tasting the stew.

"Yeah," Weaver went on, "he doesn't fit. He should get out of this line."

Two days later when Weaver was alone with Colburn, he asked, "What happened that time, Jim? When you picked the kid up?"

Colburn was shaving. He peered into the cracked mirror and sawed painfully at his grizzled jaw. "Poker game," he said. "It was crooked. I caught the shark with an extra card, then I saw two guns on me. Then the shark drew his. One of them says, 'We know you, Colburn. S'pose you go to the law?' Then he laughed."

Colburn scraped his jaw for a minute, then said, "I wasn't going to take it. I'd had a drink, and I was sore. I would've been killed. Then this kid that was standing there, he shucks a gun. 'All right,' he says. 'Deal me in, too. Or give him back his money.'

"They all stood there and sweated, and so did I, but they didn't like it none, and the kid, he stood there just as quiet as could be. Thing was, they knew this kid. I seen that right off. Then this gambler, he shoved my money at me. 'All right, Branam,' he says. 'You win this time. But you show up around here again and we'll kill you!'"

WEAVER squinted his eyes against the sun. "He should get out of this business," he repeated. "It ain't for him."

They holed in that time in back of the Little Green below the Diamond Rim. There was an undercut cliff there masked by willows, and a spring creek that fed down from the Rim. It was quiet, out of the way, and with plenty of good graze for their horses.

Weaver was washing a shirt down at the Little Green, watching the horses when Riley came down. He picked a spot close by and shucked his own shirt. Weaver saw three bullet wounds on his hide. He didn't ask, but Riley explained them.

"When I was a kid," he said, "just before I met up with you fellers—maybe a year before—fellers come in and started making a gather of our stock. Pa and me went to stop 'em. They killed Pa. And shot me up some."

"Get any of them?"

"All of 'em. Three then—two later."

Weaver squatted on his heels and lit a cigarette. "Kid, I been figuring back. You got maybe six thousand dollars saved."

Riley Branam said nothing at all, but Weaver was amused to see the way that right hand stayed out of the water. The kid was careful, and Weaver liked that. He never did like a cocky kid. He liked them sure, careful—and honest.

"Jim," Weaver said, "is pushing forty. Me and Parrish is upwards of

thirty-four. Kehoe, he'll soon be thirty. We been outlaws six to ten years. We ain't never going to be anything else until we get too old."

Riley said nothing, but he mulled around in the water with his shirt and some cactus soap.

Weaver squinted his eyes. "Kid, this here life gets you nothing. Jim Colburn's a shrewd and careful man. He's smart, we're careful, and we been lucky. It won't last. One reason we hold up here—Jim's scared."

"He ain't scared of nothing!"

"Not rightly speaking, he ain't. What he's scared of is the odds. We been too lucky. It can't last."

"What's all this talk lead to?"

"You, kid. Get out of this business."

Weaver reached from behind him to his saddlebags. He took out a poke of dust, a few nuggets and coins. He tossed the poke to Riley.

"There's a thousand there. Take it, put it with what you've got, and buy some cows. Start yourself an outfit."

Riley looked at the money, then at Weaver. "You're trying to get rid of me?"

"Uh-huh." Weaver rubbed out his smoke. "I am. You ain't cut for it, kid. You ain't a crook, and that's good. You don't like to kill—I been noticin' how you shoot to scare. But some day we'll get in a tight where we'll have to kill."

"I'll kill."

Weaver was a serious man. He took his shirt out and began to squeeze out the water. "I know it, kid. You've killed already, but you were in the right. You kill now, it'll be different."

"What'll Jim say?"

"He likes you, kid. Like a son. He'll be pleased. So will we all."

"I can't take your money."

"You ain't taking it." Weaver shook out his shirt and hung it on a bush. "Some day I'll be all stove up and too old to ride, then I'll come to you and you can fix me up in a shack on the place, and let me kill some honest beef."

They walked back to the others and Riley could see by their faces that they had known about the talk. Colburn got up as he came near. He had a poke of dust and coins.

"Three thousand here, kid. We're all buying in. You start that outfit."

II

THERE was nobody living in the Lost Mountain country, not even an Apache. Riley Branam built his cabins at the head of a mile-long canyon that looked out onto a wide sagebrush flat. He had come in over that flat, and there was plenty of grass. He built his cabin and he took his time. It felt good to have an ax in his hands again; it felt good to be building.

Rimrock, the nearest settlement, was a town unpeeled and raw. It was a dusty avenue of cottonwoods and false-fronted stores. It was a one-doctor, two-lawyers, five-saloons town. It was a town with two water troughs, a deep well, and good home-made whisky. It was a town with eight prosperous ranches nearby, a couple of lean mining prospects and a small, tightly knit society composed of the eight ranchers, the doctor, one of the lawyers, the preacher, and the newspaper editor.

It was a town where a man named Martin Hardcastle owned the leading saloon. He was a big man with a polished, hard-boned face, slicked-down black hair, and a handle-bar mustache. And among the regulars at the saloon were Strat Spooner and Nick Valentz and, locally, they were tough men.

Riley Branam came into town and rode to the bank. He got down warily, it being his first friendly appearance at a bank. Old Man Burrage looked up when Riley stopped by the gate leading to his desk.

"Want to make a deposit," Riley said.

Burrage measured him with quick, gimlet eyes, then jerked a head at the cashier. "See him."

"You're the boss. I'll see you."

Burrage nodded, indicated a chair. Riley Branam put ten thousand dollars in gold on the desk and said quietly. "I want to deposit that. And I want to buy cows."

Burrage began to feel distinctly uncomfortable. It irritated him that a boy of no more than twenty could make him feel that way. He started to speak, then changed his mind.

"The Lazy O has some longhorns

THE BEST OF THE WEST

THE popularity of the Western story has never been greater, both here and abroad, than it is today. Witness the flood of Western pocketbooks, the many Western movies with top dramatic stars in the roles filled formerly by lesser actors, and the phenomenal success of the Western on television.

It is true that you don't see as many Western pulp magazines on the stands these days, but neither do you see Collier's, nor the American, nor any number of other great magazines of the past. And they died, mainly, not because they published bad stories—they seldom did—but because of spiraling production costs and a greater spread of advertising, with much of the latter going to television and the oldest, solidest magazines in their field. It reached the point where one gradually overtook the other and they could no longer operate profitably.

With the Western pulp magazines the problem was less one of advertising than of battling the free television Western and overcoming the stigma of cheapness and sensationalism that for some inexplicable reason has become attached to the pulps. Except for a few isolated cases, this is an unfair brand, as we know, but don't take our word alone for it. Instead, we simply ask you to compare the Western stories in this issue with those you find anywhere else—and especially on television.

Naturally we wouldn't invite such a comparison if we didn't sincerely feel these yarns represent the Best of the West and are so far superior to the average television Western that there really can be no comparison. But don't let us influence you beforehand. Read the stories and then judge. And if your decision is as we believe it will be, we hope you'll come back again to where you found the best in Western fiction.

—The Editor

Burrage opened a sack, then shot a quick look at the boy. "That's money, son. How'd you come by it?"

Riley Branam did not reply, but they'll sell," he finally said.

"I want white-faced stock. This new stuff."

"The only man around here with

white-faced cattle is Dan Shattuck. He won't sell."

Riley Branam walked from the bank to the general store and bought supplies. At the livery stable he bought a buckboard and a team of mules.

Strat Spooner, one of the two local toughs with a rep was a long, tall man with stooped shoulders. The feet he shoved into his boots were bare, and he carried a low-hung gun that he could use. Rimrock had a tough name, but there had been only one gun-fight in the street. In that fight Strat Spooner had killed a man who, until then, had been known as the fastest man around Rimrock. But Strat Spooner had killed another man in Durango, and one in Tucson.

His shirt was always open at the neck and rarely clean. His eyes were white-blue and he chewed tobacco. He was a taciturn man whom nobody wanted to cross. Occasionally he punched cows, sometimes he drove travelers on buckboard trips. The rest of the time he loafed around the Verde Saloon. His credit was good with Hardcastle, who owned it.

Strat Spooner saw Riley Branam go into the bank with several heavy sacks. He saw him leave without them. He saw him load the buckboard with supplies, and he knew who had owned the mules. Riley was tall, easy-moving and quiet. He was also good-looking in a shy but rugged way. Strat Spooner decided he did not like the stranger.

He shrugged, and turned away, to watch Marie Veyre ride into town with Pico, a Mexican rider from her Uncle Dan Shattuck's ranch.

Pico had been riding for Dan Shattuck ever since Shattuck had left the Brazos. The vaquero was fifty, but rode like a man of twenty, and looked to be thirty. He, too, glanced at the buckboard, and inclined his head toward Riley.

"New hombre," he said quietly.

Marie laughed. "Pico, will you never stop trying to marry me off?"

PICO did not smile. "Your uncle, he is busy. Your mother and aunt, they are dead. Who is to look after you if not Pico?" He glanced again at Riley. "He is a handsome hombre, and he has got good mules. I know those mules."

Yet he hesitated as Riley Branam led his horse around to tie to the tailboard of the buckboard. Pico had been up the creek and over the mountain, and he knew that common cowhands do not have horses like this splendid Morgan. The long-legged crowbait Riley had ridden to join Colburn had not lasted. Outlaws ride good horses—it is a matter of survival. The Morgan was soot-black.

Marie Veyre had her share of curiosity. She, too, looked at Riley, and looked again.

The two years of riding with Colburn had done things to Riley Branam. He was over six feet—he had been when he'd joined the Colburn bunch—but he had filled out to an even one hundred and eighty. His face was dark from wind and sun, his step easy, his manner reserved, even gentle.

Riley turned and, turning, saw Marie. Their eyes met across the buckboard, and he flushed, but then he saw the brand on her horse.

"From the Running S?" he asked, and moved around the buckboard. He had assurance with boldness. "I'd like to buy some whiteface stock from you."

Pico sat his horse, his mahogany face inscrutable, yet his eyes were measuring, careful. Here was no common boy, no incidental man. This man, too, had been up the creek and over that mountain.

"Uncle Dan never sells his stock," Marie told Riley. "There are too few Herefords out here." Relenting a little, and also with an idea that she might see him again, she added, "But you might talk to him."

They rode on, and Pico was silent. Marie looked at him quickly. "What, Pico? No urging? No approval?"

The Mexican shrugged. "I do not know, *chiquita*, this one. He has done much riding."

Sensing Pico's reserve, Marie glanced back, suddenly intrigued. For Pico to say a man had done much riding—She had heard him say it of few men, her Uncle Dan for one. It could be a compliment, but it was not always so.

Strat Spooner watched them ride by, his eyes following Marie. He wanted Marie Veyre. She awakened a savage lust within him that startled even him, but Strat Spooner was a cautious man, and there was something about Pico he did not like. Pico, he felt, was dangerous. Spooner did not doubt that he could beat Pico—but knew he would have to. And such a man can take a lot of killing.

Rimrock was a small town, so it was not long before Marie knew that Riley Branam had deposited ten thousand dollars, that he had bought supplies for an extended stay, that he had squatted at Lost Mountain, and that he hired a Mexican hand named Cruz, a lean, hard-riding vaquero, whip-fast and bull-tough. He also had hired a loafing cowhand—a tophand on any outfit when he worked—named Darby Lewis.

Hardcastle knew this also, and Hardcastle was a man with resentment. He had not been accepted by the tight little group in power in Rimrock. Moreover, Hardcastle was a man with lust. Power, after a fashion, he had. In the limited circle of country around Rimrock, he was a personage. The one thing he wanted was Marie Veyre.

That he had spoken of that to Dan Shattuck was a fact known only to Dan, and to Pico.

It had come on a lazy Sunday afternoon when Marie had been visiting at Oliver's Lazy O. Dan Shattuck had been working over his books in the room in the ranch house he called the "office." Pico had been braiding a bridle in front of the bunkhouse.

Hardcastle had driven up in a freshly painted buckboard, and he had been dressed in a black suit and a starched white shirt. Pico had watched him get down from the buckboard but had remained where he was. When Hardcastle had rapped on the door Shattuck himself had let him in, obviously surprised.

A tall, fine-looking man with white hair and finely cut features, Shattuck had ushered Hardcastle into the office and seated him. He had been puzzled, but suspected it was some ranching business.

Hardcastle was forty-five years old and weighed two hundred and forty, not much of it excess baggage. He carried himself well, and he could at times be suave and adroit. He had not been so now. He'd seemed to be a little astonished at what he was doing, but had convinced himself his suit would be accepted.

He'd put his big hands on his knees.

"Dan," he said abruptly, "I'm a wealthy man. I'm healthy, and I've never been married, but I've decided it's time."

Shattuck had never know Hardcastle except as the proprietor of a place where he occasionally bought a drink. He'd been still more puzzled when Hardcastle had said:

"I figured the right thing was to come to you first."

"Me?"

"Yes, Dan. You see, it's Marie I'm thinking of."

Dan Shattuck had been completely astonished, then angry. Hardcastle ran a saloon—an accepted business—but he had a hand in other entertainment in the town, a fact not unknown to Shattuck or some others, although Hardcastle believed his tracks had been well covered.

Dan Shattuck had got to his feet abruptly. "Then you can stop thinking," he said coolly. "When my niece marries it will not be to a saloonkeeper who also traffics in women. Now get out. And if you ever venture to speak

to my niece I'll have you horsewhipped and run out of town!"

Hardcastle's face had turned red, then white. He'd started to speak, then had got to his feet, his hands shaking, his eyes bulged. But he'd been unable to make words come. Abruptly he'd turned, left the house, and driven off in his buckboard.

Pico had put aside his bridle and walked slowly toward the house. He'd stood there, his hands on the porch rail, while Dan told him what had happened.

"If he ever so much as makes a move toward her," Pico had said quietly then, "I'll kill him. . . ."

That had hapened two years before, and Dan Shattuck believed it was over and done with. Pico was not so sure. He had not missed seeing the way Hardcastle's eyes followed Marie whenever she was in sight.

Three weeks passed and nothing more was seen of Riley Branam in Rimrock, and then the rumor reached town that he had thirty head of whiteface cattle on his place at Lost Mountain. He had bought them from a trail driver moving a mixed herd through New Mexico. He had two bulls, old but still useful.

Darby Lewis brought the news to town, and Hardcastle listened, then bought a drink.

"What's this Riley Branam like, Darby?"

The cowhand shrugged. "Can't figure him. He's a hand. Knows cattle, knows horses. And he's a better than fair shot with a rifle, judging by the antelope he knocked over on the ride."

"Lot of money for a man that young," Hardcastle suggested. "How'd he come by it?"

Lewis shrugged. "Mined it, likely. What I hear, half of it was dust and nuggets."

Hardcastle was thinking. He'd never forgotten the abrupt manner in which Shattuck had turned on him, nor the words the rancher had used. It had looked as if Hardcastle would never have Marie as long as Shattuck was alive and strong, but now he thought he saw an opening. . . .

Pico met Riley's vaquero, Cruz, on the street and they went to a cantina together. Tia Morales's place, on a back street. The big Pico and Cruz, rapier-thin and rapier-dangerous were old friends. Pico had been in the fight when Cruz had got his scarred cheek.

Pico asked many questions about Branam, while the other vaquero sat silent.

"This one," Cruz finally said, and it was all he would say, "is a man. . . . "

MARIE VEYRE'S curiosity was piqued by lack of information concerning the rancher of Lost Mountain. One day she rode out past Cathedral Rock where she could look across Coffee Creek Flat up toward Lost Mountain. It was good range Branam had chosen, but how could he do anything with just thirty head of cattle?

Nor had she failed to notice her uncle's displeasure at the news. He had liked owning the only Herefords around. Now they were not the only ones.

She rode on, stopping to water her horse in Coffee Creek. Riding along the bottom of the draw she let her horse walk slowly upstream while she enjoyed the cool shade under the trees after the hot ride in the sun. Suddenly she drew in sharply. Sitting his horse not a dozen yards away was Nick Valentz, from Rimrock.

He was a big, rough-handed man, and she did not recall ever having seen him anywhere but around Hardcastle's saloon, and at a distance.

He looked at her coolly. She was abruptly and acutely conscious of her figure, of the way her breasts tautened the material of her blouse. She wished she was away from here—anywhere but here.

"You're quite a woman, Marie," Valentz drawled, and smiled insolently. "And quite a ways from home."

To ride ahead would be to ride nearer to him, to turn back would be to ride down the green tunnel under the trees which she had followed for nearly a quarter of a mile. She decided it would be safer to go ahead, for if he followed her into that tunnel—

She started her horse and when near him, reined her horse out to go around. Promptly he pushed his horse ahead of her, still smiling, that same lazy, insolent smile.

"Are you going to get out of my way?" she asked sharply.

"Ain't decided."

He rested his big hands on the pommel and grinned around his freshly rolled cigarette. She was mighty pretty, but if she kicked up a row he'd have to leave the country. But would she?

III

MARIE VEYRE was in a quandary. When Valentz moved his horse forward he had blocked her off from the easy bank. Now she faced a steep four feet of earth topped by trees and brush. Abruptly she swung her horse, but he reached out and grabbed her bridle.

Instantly, she swung her quirt. The lash slashed across his face, then his hand. With a yell he jerked back. Then, white with fury, he lunged his horse at hers.

And something unexpected by either of them happened.

A rope shot out of nowhere and Nick Valentz left his saddle. He lit, all sprawled out, in the foot-deep stream.

Marie looked up, and her heart missed a beat. Riley Branam was on the bank, sitting his black horse. Valentz started to get up, but the black moved and he was spilled again. The black headed off, dragging him a few yards in the water.

Riley smilled at Marie. "Morning, ma'am. This feller seemed to need a little cooling off."

She rode up on the bank. "Drown him, for all I care!" Then she smiled, but her face was still white. "I must thank you." The black horse backed quickly and Valentz was spilled again.

"It's a pleasure." Riley's grin was frankly humorous.

"I've missed seeing you around for awhile," she said.

"Went east," he explained. "After cows."

The black horse swung and the rope again spilled Valentz as he climbed, spluttering, to his feet, only to go down, sprawling at another jerk on the rope.

"I'd like to see your ranch," Marie said to Riley. "I've never been to Lost Mountain."

The black horse swung and Valentz was dragged out on the bank. Leaving the horse to hold the rope tight, Riley went down the rope, jerked the water-soaked man to his feet, and shook off the rope.

"Next time—" Riley's voice was not pleasant—"get out of the lady's way."

"Next time I'll kill you!" Valentz stepped back, his hands wide.

"Why wait?" Riley Branam's voice was suddenly quiet, almost toneless. "Any time."

Usually Nick Valentz tried to live up to his rep of being a tough hand. But now he heard something in that voice he did not like. Once he had seen Wes Hardin kill a man, and Hardin's voice then had sounded something like Branam's did now. Valentz thought about it, decided to try it, then changed his mind.

He turned carefully and walked to his horse. When he was in saddle he looked back. Riley Branam had not moved. Valentz started for Rimrock, a thoughtful man.

Hardcastle was secretly pleased when he saw Valentz's fury. It would be a convenient weapon for him to use himself. He was equally pleased at hearing about the meeting between Marie and Riley Branam. It never even occurred to him that Marie Veyre could possibly be even slightly

interested in the strange rancher, and it fitted in with some secret plans he had made to have them meet.

Hardcastle had been making discreet inquiries down the trail. But nowhere had he discovered any trace of a man known as Riley Branam. None of the men in the mining districts knew him, and he was not wanted anywhere. Yet the saloonman was not too disappointed, for he realized that no honest man could be so hard to trace.

Twice during the next ten days, Riley Branam bought cattle. He had put the word out that he would accept any healthy whiteface stock, pure or mixed breed. The stock he bought was all from trail herds and he paid good prices, but he was building his own herd.

Often as Riley went about his work he found himself pausing from time to time to look off across the hills toward the distant Running S—and Marie. Cruz noticed that, but the vaquero merely smiled and hummed a Mexican song, and said nothing.

THE LITTLE herd had grown to two hundred head. Only about fifty head were pure whitface cattle, but the other were good stock, mixed breeds, and the two bulls were pure. Riley was buying breeding stock—only a few steers, mostly cows. Cruz had noted that Riley spent more time over the cows and chose them with care.

There was much to do. Cleaning waterholes and enlarging springs, digging out a couple of basins for the water to gather in quantity, hunting mountain lions and wolves, building corrals and a stable.

Several times, when riding, Riley came upon tracks in the hills. Once when Cruz was with him, Riley stopped to examine the tracks. It became plain to him that someone had been spying on his work, watching from various hiding places.

Valentz? Some stranger? Or someone from one of the older outfits? And it was in that moment of puzzlement that nostalgia gripped him, and he found himself wondering about the bunch. He'd had no news, and almost a year had gone by.

Cruz, watching his face as he studied the tracks, was curious.

Two or three strange riders, he knew, had dropped in at Hartcastle's saloon. They had talked with Strat Spooner there, then drifted on. Cruz had been in town and had seen two of them. One rode a gray mustang with a broken hoof. He had mentioned it, casually to Branam when he got back to Lost Mountain.

Now Riley Branam was seeing that track near Coffee Creek. . . .

One bright afternoon, Marie Veyre ran into a friend of hers on the street in Rimrock—Peg Oliver, a short, plump girl with a quick smile and dimples.

"Marie," Peg said, "one of the girls is saying you know that new rancher, Riley Branam."

"A little." Marie caught sight of him down the street at just that instant. He was tying the dusty black at the hitchrail. "Why?"

"We're having a party at the Lazy O. Why don't you bring him? Or anyway ask him over?"

Marie's pulse jumped a little. She knew instantly it was just what she wanted to do, but was cautious.

"I don't know him well," she demurred. "He—he seems sort of mysterious."

"I know. Isn't it exciting?"

Riley Branam at one of their parties! Marie tried to picture him with the group and found it remarkably easy. Tall, serious, hard-working as he was, he would fit right in.

Excited, she went on toward the store. Uncle Dan Shattuck was there talking to Sheriff Larsen, a big, ponderous blond man.

When Larsen had gone, Marie said, "Uncle Dan, Peg wants me to invite Riley Branam to their party."

Dan Shattuck's face tightened ever so little. "Marie," he said quietly, "I wouldn't. Not right now."

She had never seen him quite like this. Shattuck was a little stiff for a Western man, but he was friendly.

"You're jealous!" she taunted. "Just because he's buying whiteface cattle!"

"No, it's not that." He looked down the street. Cruz, in a short Mexican jacket, had come into the street, walking his zebra dun. Shattuck shrugged. "It's—Marie, we're losing cattle."

Shocked, she stared at him. He put his hand on her arm. "Remember, we don't know anything yet. But I'd hold off any invitations. It might save embarrassment later."

Feeling a little dazed, she watched her uncle walk away, suddenly aware that without realizing it she had allowed her thoughts to turn more and more toward the hard-working young rider of Lost Mountain. But what did she know about him? What had he ever said about himself? To anyone?

She remembered Pico's reserve. His comment that the young man had ridden a lot of trails. She remembered Riley's cool, expert handling of Valentz, who was supposed to be so tough, and the way Valentz had backed down. She had never told her uncle about that, afraid he would face Valentz himself.

MARTIN HARDCASTLE was standing in the door of his saloon when she passed. As he looked at her and smiled a little, it was a curiously triumphant smile. Puzzled by it, she walked on to the post office. Pico was loafing there. He seemed in a deeply serious mood.

"There is trouble coming, *chiquita,*" he told her gently. "Be careful when you ride alone."

Dan Shattuck was not the only one who had been losing cattle. Oliver had lost some, and so had another rancher named Holton. Both visited Sheriff Larsen.

STICKLER

She sat down on a cactus.

Her cowboy beau was there.

That there's the kind of practice

That makes a prickly pair!

—S. Omar Barker

Larsen listened to their complaints and nodded. "I working," he said in his slow voice, and he took down the facts they gave him in a precise handwriting that was like a woman's. . . .

That night rain swept the range, a sudden, drenching downpour that turned into a cloudburst. Cruz had one boot off when he heard a rider. He went to the window, peered out.

It was a strange rider on a fine dark horse. The man took the horse into the stable, but did not come to the bunkhouse. Instead, he went slopping through the stable door toward Riley's own quarters.

Riley heard the knock and got up. Rain was thundering on the roof. The lamp flame flickered and almost went out when he opened the door. His visitor was Kehoe.

Inside, Kehoe shed his slicker and accepted coffee gratefully. His thin face was hard, but there was brightness in his eyes. He looked around.

"Nice, kid. Mighty nice. Better than we've got."

"Part of it is yours."

Kehoe shook his head. "Maybe. We'll see."

It was good to see him. Of them all, Riley had been closer to Kehoe than to any of the others. They had been saddle partners.

"We've had bad luck," Kehoe was saying quietly, "and we're holed up. Parrish caught one, but he's better now."

Riley was curious about the object of his visit as he got down some beans and beef and put them on the stove to heat. Kehoe had not stopped here by accident.

Suddenly Kehoe looked up. "Kid, you had any trouble?"

"No."

"You will have. There's a word around. Somebody has been hiring some salty riders, rustlers, gun-slingers. You remember Desloge?"

"Little fellow—one we ran into near Lordsburg?"

"That's the one. He's been asking about you. Seemed almighty curious what had become of you. We tell nobody nothing, but he's kept coming back, asking questions. He's teamed up with a gunman named Gus Enloe, a bad number. Weaver took out and tailed them through the hills, and they headed this way."

"Thanks."

Kehoe got up.

"I'd better go, kid. No use to get you into trouble."

"Go in the morning. Not in this rain."

Long after the outlaw was asleep, Riley Branam lay awake. Kehoe was tired. The man slept as if dead-beat. And it had probably been months since he had slept in a bed. Kehoe's boots were worn, his clothes shabby. Suddenly, despite his nostalgia for his few real friends, Riley knew that they had been right—the outlaw life had never been for him.

Kehoe was awake and dressed before light. He shook Riley awake. On a slip of paper he had written down three addresses.

"If you get in trouble," he said, "write to all three of 'em. One of 'em will get us. We'll come running."

"All right." Riley pulled on his jeans. "Kehoe?"

"Yeah?"

"Watch your step. And this sheriff in town. He's a big, slow-moving Swede, but he's dangerous."

"All right, kid."

An hour later when Cruz went to the barn, the strange horse was gone. The still falling rain had wiped out any tracks. Without knowing quite why he did it, Cruz picked up a few pieces of mud that had fallen from the horse's hooves. He tossed them out into the yard and threw some fresh straw on the ground in the stall.

Cruz had his own brand of loyalty. He rode for his brand, but even more for the man who owned it. And there had been a time, long ago and below the Border—Well, who can say what a man will not do in his youth.

THE FIRST intimation that all was not well for Riley Branam came from Peggy Oliver. Even though she had never met Riley, before this when she'd seen him she had always been inclined to flirt. Now she looked at him with wide eyes, then quickly turned away when their eyes met. At the bank, too, there was a coolness which had never been before.

Riley was at a loss to explain the change, but it soon became apparent elsewhere. People would accept his money for what he wanted, but no conversation was offered.

When Riley reached town one morning, Sheriff Larsen stopped him on the street. The Swede was a huge man, and he seemed vaguely lost now.

"You buying cows yet?" he asked.

Riley nodded. "Whiteface or mixed, when I can get 'em."

"Didn't think that there was many around?"

"There isn't."

"Got bills of sale?"

Riley Branam looked at him. "Of course. What are you getting at?"

"Do you mind if I come out and look 'em over?"

Riley Branam felt his neck getting hot. People were watching. There had been, when the sheriff approached him, a noticeable pause on the street.

"Any time, Sheriff." Abruptly he walked away, with anger welling up inside of him. What was the matter? What had he done wrong?

And then he saw Desloge.

The outlaw was sitting on a bench in front of Hardcastle's saloon, a shabby, dirty man with a deep-lined face and a low-slung gun.

He looked up, recognition in his eyes, and he closed one slowly.

Further angered, Branam slammed into the saloon.

IV

AT THE bar Riley Branam ordered a drink, aware suddenly that his carefully built life was in danger. Desloge could make him a hunted man. So could Larsen if the sheriff found out about his past. Riley knew this must not happen.

Standing down the bar was a stranger with a wide dark face. He wore a calfskin vest and had intensely blue eyes.

From Kehoe's description, Riley instantly knew the man. This was Gus Enloe, the notorious gunman who rode with Desloge.

Hardcastle, standing at the bar himself, moved up and leaned close to Riley.

"What's this I hear about Shattuck and Oliver? Have they got the sheriff on you?"

"I've heard nothing about it." Branam's lips were stiff. "Why would they bother me?"

Hardcastle shrugged, and after a minute, he moved away. Riley Branam turned his glass in his hand. So it was Shattuck then? And Oliver? He tossed off his drink and walked from the saloon.

"That's him," Hardcastle said to Enloe. "Ever see him before?" he asked quickly.

"No, not that I recall. Maybe Desloge has."

Riley Branam stopped on the street in the shade of an awning. He could feel it building around him now. The attitude of the townspeople, Larsen's questions, Hardcastle's comments and now—Desloge.

He felt trapped, lost. Suddenly he realized how much he had come to love the ranch at Lost Mountain. The house was no plain, ordinary ranch house.

From the log beginning he had built a long, low adobe house, large enough for a family. He lived in the log section still, but the rest was built, even partly furnished.

He knew the hills now, knew their contours and their peaks and canyons. He knew where the grass was greenest and where his cattle liked to go for shade. He had driven those cat-

tle to his own grass, he had seen their gaunt sides fill out. He was coming to love a land for itself.

He would not be driven off, not by anybody, at any time! Here he had made his start to a new life, here he would be on his own land, beside his own house.

Abruptly he walked inside the store. Voices stilled, but he walked directly to the counter. There was a rack on the counter holding a few packages of flower seed. Deliberately he chose several.

Dan Shattuck was standing there, not looking at him. Marie was there also, but she had only then turned to see who had come.

Coolly, Riley Branam tossed the packages on the counter and looked up into the eyes of the storekeeper.

"I'll take those," he said. "When a man plans to stay on a place, it should look like a home." He dropped a coin on the counter and picked up the seed. "And I'm staying."

He walked out.

At Tia Morales's Cruz fingered his glass and looked over the table at Pico. "You are my friend, Pico—" Cruz's temper flared—"and if you say Señor Shattuck has lost cattle, then it is so. But if you say Señor Branam has stolen those cattle, then I shall kill you!"

Across the table the two Mexicans looked at each other for a long time, a little with bravery, a little with regret. Then Pico shrugged.

"I do not say it, amigo. I hope it is not true. But I do know—and who else has whiteface cows of such a breed?"

Back up the street near Hardcastle's saloon Strat Spooner watched Riley Branam with half-closed eyes. So far the two men had not crossed paths, yet like two strange bulldogs, they were aware of each other. And each walked quietly and moved easily. Spooner was puzzled. Riley had the look of a man who had been over the trail, yet nobody knew him. Nobody at all.

Desloge waited until dark, then took the trail out of town. He had waited until he was sure no one had seen him. But two men did see him go. One was Hardcastle, who had been watching him, and the other was Sheriff Larsen.

SO WHEN Desloge took the trail toward Lost Mountain Larsen was following him at a discreet distance until there could be no doubt where the man was going. Going back to his office then, Larsen leafed through circulars until he found a faded one on Desloge. A wanted rustler, suspected stage robber.

It was well after dark when Desloge descended to the ranch. And again it was Cruz who first saw the visitor, only this time the man left his horse in the brush, and this time Cruz saw his face. And he had seen Desloge loitering about town.

Riley Branam had a book in his hands when he hard the knock. The truth was, that while Riley could read, he had never learned to read well. And now he had been struggling with this book, one of four he had found in an abandoned shack in Lonesome Pocket and brought home. The one with which he was struggling was *Plutarch's Lives.*

At the knock, he put it aside and opened the door. Desloge stepped in, grinned, and walked across the room to a chair.

"Like old times, ain't it, Riley?"

Riley Branam sat down. "As far as we're concerned," he said quietly, "there were never any old times. I've seen you only once in my life. I've never talked to you. I don't want to talk to you now."

Desloge's little eyes tighted. "You will. S'pose I talked to Larsen? Or Dan Shattuck?"

Branam moved so swiftly that Desloge had no chance. Grabbing the man by the collar Riley jerked him to his toes. He slapped him three times across the face, then threw him to the floor.

"You ever say a word about me, here or anywhere," he said, still quietly, "and I'll kill you."

Desloge got up slowly. Nothing had gone the way he planned. He had no stomach for night raids on cattle. A man could get killed that way. It had seemed simple, what he had planned. He had meant to suggest to Branam that for a thousand dollars he would ride out of the country, and then he'd meant to go to El Paso or even Fort Worth. With a thousand dollars a man could do a lot.

Shaken, he brushed off his clothes. He did not even think of reaching for a gun. It was like him that he did not.

"All I wanted—" his voice shook a little, and he could taste blood from a split lip—"was a roadstake. Say a hundred dollars?"

Those slaps had taken something out of Desloge. It had taken nine hundred dollars worth of confidence out of him.

"Ride out like you rode in," Riley Branam told him "and be glad you're able."

Desloge walked from the house, and Cruz saw him go. He saw him go because not three minutes before another man had appeared in the bunkhouse door—a hard-faced man with white hair. Darby Lewis had looked up from his bunk, startled.

"Get up," the man had said to them, "and watch the boss's door. You'll want to be able to swear that a man left the house, and what he looked like. And you'll swear to nothing else, understand?"

And then the man had been gone, and neither cowhand could say who he was. Although for the first time since knowing Riley Branam, Cruz had an idea what he might be.

The two men sat in the doorway in the darkness, and they saw Desloge come out of the house, his face plain in the light. They saw him walk into the brush after his horse. They heard the horse's receding hoofbeats.

Forty-two minutes and some seconds later, Desloge slowed his running horse and walked him down a slope near a towering butte. The moon was out and the light lay white upon the sagebrush flats. Emerging from the shadow of the butte he was thinking how weird were the shadows of the mesquite, how like a horseman one shadow was—and then he stopped his horse. It was a horseman.

He knew the rider. A man with white hair and a seamed, brown face. And in that instant, Desloge knew he was going to die.

"Couldn't let him live honest, could you?" The man's voice was quiet, without anger. "Your kind never can. He put the fear into you, so you'd go away, but sooner or later, you'd talk too much. You'd spoil something fine."

DESLOGE could not speak. Once he tried to, and then he knew, with startling clarity, that if he denied the man's statement he would be lying, and right now, he felt, was not a time to lie.

"I'll ride,' he said. "I won't even stop for my warbag. I'll keep going."

The man in the moonlight ignored his plea. "You've got a gun. You've killed men. So take your chance."

Desloge thought he saw a chance. There was a cloud near the moon. He started to speak, was clearing his throat, when the shadow moved, and he swung his horse toward the rocks of the mesa. At the same time he jerked his gun.

He got it clear, felt a bursting sense of triumph. He brought his gun down —and ran into something in the dark. Something white-hot that went through him and left him floating toward the ground. He hit the ground, felt himself roll over, and when he looked up the cloud was gone from the moon and the light was in his eyes.

And then he was dead. And in the night there was the sound of a horse trotting, and somewhere over the mesa's rim, a wolf howled to the moon. . . .

It was the night of the Oliver party at the Lazy O, and there was dancing. Pico, in a brocaded Spanish jacket and a red sash, loitered near the gate. He was listening to the talk of a group of men nearby.

One of them, Bud Oliver, had been saying there was only one thing to do. If Larsen did not act, they would. There had been no rustling around here for years until this Branam had come in.

Now a rancher named Eustis agreed, more quietly. Bigelow, another, was hesitant, half-convinced. Dan Shattuck hesitated, too. On principle, he was against mob law, against violence.

"I can feel it coming," Oliver was saying. "I can smell trouble. And I ask you, who is he? Where did he come from? Where did he ever work? Where did he get the money he spends?"

"If we move against him," Bigelow said, "there'll be bloodshed. He has two men besides himself."

"Lewis won't stick," Oliver said impatiently. "Nor will Cruz. They both know us."

Pico shifted his shoulders against the wall. He rarely talked. "Cruz will fight," he said. "He will die, if need be. He has told me so."

"Then we'll hang Cruz along with him," Oliver said harshly. "I've lost three hundred head in two months."

"To hang Cruz will not be easy," Pico said, "nor to hang Riley Branam. Branam is a dangerous man, more dangerous than any man here. He will die very hard, and many will go before him."

"I'll gamble on it," Oliver said shortly.

He was a hard-headed man, but Dan Shattuck looked thoughtfully at Pico. The Mexican was no fool. He had an uncanny judgment of men.

There was a stir at the door and, looking up they saw Sheriff Larsen.

"Branam," he said. "Is he here?"

Oliver's head came around sharply. "Did you think he would be?"

Larsen glanced once at Marie, and she felt herself flush.

"I thought he might be," the sheriff said.

"What's the matter?" someone asked.

"Feller named Desloge. He is dead —killed about an hour ago out by the buttes."

"Branam!" Oliver exclaimed with satisfaction. "By the Lord Harry, we've got him! Want a posse, Sheriff?"

Larsen looked around the room. "Come if you like," he said. "I don't think there'll be any trouble."

As the men went to get their horses there was another horse being led off into the dark, and only one man saw it go. Pico, who had followed Marie into the darkness, watched her mount and ride away. He turned and went back for his own horse then, for he must ride with the posse.

His thought turned to girl on the racing mare.

He told himself. It is good to be young and in love. Like my own daughter, she is, and I was afraid it would not come for her. The joy, and the hurt.

THE MARE ran, then trotted, then walked, trotted and ran. Riley Branam heard the racing horses on the trail and was waiting in the doorway when she rode up.

"Riley," she asked swiftly as he looked up at her in the moonlight, "did you kill Desloge?"

"No."

"They are coming for you! Sheriff Larsen and the ranchers."

"All right."

She was impatient. "You must get away! They'll not believe you!"

"This is my home. I'll stay." He looked at the mare. "Go inside and keep out of sight. I'll put the mare in the stable."

She hesitated, then dismounted, went inside, and stopped short, rather startled. She knew how cowhands usually lived, yet this room was neat,

even painfuly clean. She saw a door beyond and walked on, carrying a candle. The home was in Spanish style, cool, comfortable, pleasant. In the daylight one window would look toward the red mountains over the canyons to the north, another would look into blue distance across the sage flats.

She was drinking coffee when he came back into the house and took down his gunbelts. They were much worn. He strapped them on.

"I haven't thanked you," he said and, surprisingly, he took her by the shoulders.

She came out of her chair, not resisting, filled with a sort of startled wonder.

"When this is over," he said, "I want you here—always."

He stepped out into the moonlight then, and was standing there when the posse rode into the yard.

"Late riding, Sheriff," he said quietly. "And you're in good company. Or are you?"

"We want you for killing Desloge!" Oliver's voice was loud. "Drop them gunbelts!"

"Take it easy!" Larsen's voice was stern. "I talk here."

V

DAN SHATTUCK looked at the tall young man who waited quietly before his accusers and, despite himself, the older rancher could not but admire Riley Branam. There was no bravado in the young rancher; only a sort of calm certainty. Shattuck saw a shadow against a curtain inside the house, and his eyes suddenly flickered. Then his gaze went back to Riley.

"You seen Desloge tonight?" Larsen asked Branam.

"He was here," Riley said.

"What for?"

"My busines."

"It's my business now." Larsen's voice was only faintly accented. "He's been killed."

"I didn't do it."

Oliver started to interrupt, but Larsen lifted a hand. He had opened his mouth to speak again when Cruz moved in from the darkness and ranged himself beside Riley. Speaking quietly, Cruz told them about Desloge leaving, about the man who had told him and Darby Lewis to watch for that.

"A lie!" Oliver burst out.

Cruz looked at him. "At another time, Señor," he said, "you will apologize for that. I do not lie."

"He's right." Darby Lewis had come up. "The feller was nobody I ever saw before. Didn't get a good look at his face. Sort of square-chinned. He was—" Lewis was emphatic now—"nobody to mess with."

Sheriff Larsen believed them; Riley could see that. Shattuck's face was stiff and cold. Nobody could tell what he believed, yet instinctively Riley knew that Larsen was the leader here, could sway the minds of all of them.

"One question." Larsen paused a moment. "Had you ever seen Desloge before? Did you know him?"

No change came to Riley Branam's face. Inside the house, Marie leaned close to the window, listening.

"Yes," Riley said, "I saw him once before. Only once. And I knew he was a horse thief and a rustler."

"All right." Larsen swung his horse. "Gentlemen, we go to town."

When the last of their horses had trooped away, Riley Branam returned to the house. For an instant he faced Marie across the room. Her face was still now, her gray eyes quiet.

"What you said before they came," she asked. "Did you mean that?"

Miserably he knew he'd had no right to say what he had said, yet it was what he had wished to say, and in the stress of the moment, he had said it. Now, remembering Jim Colburn and the outfit—

He hesitated, saw her face stiffen. She started by him for the door.

"Wait a minute!" he begged. "Let me answer."

At the door she did stop. "You didn't mean it," she said. "You—"

"I meant it," he protested, "but I've no right—"

Marie went out the door then, and she did not stop nor look back. He saw Cruz holding her horse for her, but he made no move to prevent her going. How could he ask a girl to share this with him? A ranch half owned by his outlaw friends, who had given him his chance, and to whom he owed first loyalty?

Even tonight one of them had killed to protect him, and to protect this that in part belonged to them.

A time would come when, wounded and driven, they would need his help. Or if not, when too old to ride they would at last give up and come in. Or until the law had them—or death. What they had given him was no small thing. A chance, even if a chance founded upon stolen money.

He walked back into the house, undressed and fell into bed, blowing out the lamp almost as an afterthought....

Dan Shattuck said nothing to Marie on her return. That she had suffered a shock, he could see, yet from her own reactions he deduced it was a mental shock, or emotional.

His herd had dwindled, some of his prize cattle were gone, but he made no move to start a further investigation. Bud Oliver was ranting. Eustis and Bigelow were with him all the way now. And again their target was Riley Branam.

MARIE still rode out, taking long rides across the mesas and along the rims and canyons, with the wind in her face and her hair blowing. Occasionally, she saw the tracks of riders. Once, near Bear Sign Canyon, she drew up suddenly.

In the bottom of the canyon was a fire, and four horses were picketed nearby. She could see only three men until, circling, she saw a fourth. He lay on blankets under an overhang of rock. She watched for a long time, knowing that the man was very ill.

She knew it more truly when she heard a voice raised stridently:

"No matter what he wants! He'll die here! I say, take him to the kid's place!"

She heard no more, but when a horseman left Bear Sign, she was following, keeping out of sight! The rider circled, did all he could to cover his trail, then hit the main road and followed it until he could enter the brakes near Lost Mountain. When she saw him again he had dismounted in the cover of the trees.

Evidently he gave some signal, for she saw Riley come to the door and stretch, then saunter carelessly toward the trees. Twice he stopped, but there was no one around the home place. Then he disappeared into the trees.

Thoughtfully, Marie rode slowly back toward the Running S.

Sheriff Larsen was at the dinner table with her father when she came in. She heard him say:

"One of them wounded, anyway. But they got clean off again. I reckon it was the Colburn bunch."

To her question, Larsen replied, "Four men try holdup at Casner Station. They take some money, but in the shooting, one outlaw is wounded, we think. He was carried off by the others."

She said nothing at all of her discovery, yet all night she thought of the wounded man. From what the sheriff had said, the man must have been shot at least three days before. Yet they dared not call a doctor. To have done that would have been an open invitation to capture.

In the morning Dan Shattuck had ridden away with Pico when suddenly Marie began to recall things she had almost forgotten. What had Riley tried to say to her? He had said, "I meant it. I've no right—" And then she had cut him off. Suppose he was an outlaw, like the others!

Yet he had not ridden with outlaws lately. There had been no time. Still, that would explain the source of the money with which he had started his ranch!

He did love her then, but he would not speak because of what lay behind him! And perhaps because of others to whom he so obviously owed loyalty, for some reason.

Suddenly her mind was made up. A man was dying out there, and what Dr. McNary would not do for a man like that he might do for her . . . !

Without doubt this was the trail of the Colburn gang! And rewards for their capture were rich and large.

He struck off, following their trail. Carrying the wounded man, they had stopped often. But when he reached the trail at Lost Mountain he knew for certain where they had gone. He was turning his horse toward Rimrock when he saw Valentz.

"You know what I know?" Valentz called to him.

Strat nodded. "Let's go! We'll get the boys and round this bunch up . . ."

"He got away before we could get a picture of him!"

Strat Spooner had struck a hot trail and followed it. In remote Bear Sign Canyon he found where several men had camped. Satisfaction lighted his face. Here was something for him, even if things weren't shaping up around Rimrock and Hardcastle could not make up his mind to anything.

HARDCASTLE sat alone in his office after Strat Spooner had been there and gone. Spooner had told him of the Colburn gang holed up at Lost Mountain, and for a moment he had felt a sudden glow of triumph. He had been waiting for such a break, had known it would come. He had

given Spooner his assent to capture the bunch, and Spooner had rushed off eagerly.

There would be an attack, perhaps capture of the Colburn gang. That was of little importance—to Martin Hardcastle. What was important was that there would be shooting. And as long as there were known bandits in the country they would be blamed for whatever happened.

He called a half-witted Mexican boy and gave him a message for Dan Shattuck.

Sheriff Larsen also sat alone in his office, and also thought. He thought slowly and carefully, as always. Each bit of information he had gleaned was pondered and examined, then re-examined. For a long time he had been gathering information, but then Larsen was more than usually aware of his duties and responsibilities. He was more than a sheriff in this remote section. He'd had to be judge and jury as well on more than one occasion.

Desloge had been known to him by name and record. He'd had no reason to move against Desloge, so he had not. Larsen was not a bigoted man, and he knew his West. The law was so elastic in this country where he officiated that he knew of more than one man who had stretched the law a point or two. Big cattlemen held range that belonged to the Government, but they used it to the best advantage. It might not always be legal, but it was right from a Western point of view.

Desloge was dead now, and despite the fuming of Oliver, Larsen believed the story of Cruz and Darby Lewis. It fitted with what else he knew. And the death of Desloge was no loss, here or anywhere else.

On his desk lay a sheaf of papers—reports on crimes attributed to the Colburn gang. For several years they had operated as a tight unit of four men. They had been swift, efficient, dangerous. In that time they had killed only two men, both of them officers of the law, men who had accepted the risk of death with their jobs.

For a time there had been five members of the gang—the fifth member no more than a boy.

The time this boy had joined the outlaw bunch coincided with the disappearance of young Riley Branam from his old stamping grounds. Larsen had made discreet inquiries. Aside from skill with a gun, which he rarely used, Branam had been a hard-working, serious boy. He came of a good family.

Larsen heaved his big body around in the chair and helped himself to a healthy pinch of Copenhagen. He rolled it under his lip and looked out at the dusty street. There were a dozen saddled horses in front of Hardcastle's. More than usual at the hour.

He turned back to his thoughts. Lately there had again been but four members of the Colburn gang—and Branam had taken up ranching at Lost Mountain. Almost a year had gone by since he had made his first deposit in the bank across the street. Larsen had crossed and recrossed the Lost Mountain range, and he was a man who understood work and the cattle business. Riley Branam was working hard, using his head.

Martin Hardcastle would have been surprised to know that Sheriff Larsen knew of that humiliating visit of his to Dan Shattuck. He would have been further surprised to know that Larsen, without leaving his battered old desk, had figured out the reason behind it.

It had not been difficult. Hardcastle was not in the cattle business. Shattuck rarely ever patronized Hardcastle's saloon. The two men did not meet socially. But many times Hardcastle must have stood on the steps of his saloon and watched Marie Veyre ride by—and Larsen was no fool.

Hardcastle, Larsen knew, was an egotist, and he was arrogant. On that memorable day when the man had driven to the Shattuck ranch, the sheriff had seen him take out the buckboard, had noticed the dark suit.

He'd had a good idea where the saloonman had been going, and had foreseen the result.

This was not, at the moment, any of Larsen's business as sheriff, but it could become his business. And, knowing Hardcastle, Larsen was sure it would.

VI

KEHOE was sitting on the steps of Riley's ranch house when Cruz rode into the yard. The Mexican reined his horse around and jerked his head toward the trail.

"Marie Veyre is coming, with the doctor!"

Kehoe got up swiftly. Riley came to the door. He wore a dark red shirt this morning, jeans, and both guns. "You sure?" he asked Cruz.

Cruz nodded. "She was up in the hills last night about sundown." He paused. "Her mare was near Bear Sign, too, before that."

Riley Branam's eyes sought the hills, but he was not looking at them. He was thinking of Marie, of her face when she had left him, of her sudden hurt when his reply had been hesitant. Now she was bringing help. Or was she?

When she did ride into the yard with the doctor, Riley Branam was alone on the steps.

"Lucky you should show up, Doc," he said quietly. "I've got a wounded cowhand."

Dr. McNary's cool eyes appraised the young rancher. "I'll look at him," he said.

He walked past Riley, entered the ranch house and went on to the room where the wounded man lay. He took the man's wrist for a moment, then unbound the wound.

He looked up sharply. "Did you get the bullet out?"

"We—I mean I was afraid to tackle it."

"Got to come out. Marie, you can help me. . . ."

An hour later he came to the door and rolled down his sleeves. "He's got a chance, but only a chance."

Marie came to the door and stood beside Riley. Her face was white and drawn. Riley took her arm but said nothing, listening to McNary.

"He's tough. I've given up trying to figure the chances of some of these men. They live in spite of everything." He glanced toward the corral where Kehoe was rubbing down a horse. "Taking on some new hands, I see." His voice was casual. "Soon be round-up time."

Marie mounted her horse when McNary got ready to leave.

"Be careful, Riley," she said, but did not look at him. "Sheriff Larsen would know these men."

"Marie—" Riley reached up and took her hand, forced her to meet his eyes —"I'm honest."

"I believe you," she said quietly.

Her fingers tightened on his hand, and then she was riding away.

Jim Colburn came from the bunkhouse with Parrish. It was Weaver who lay on the bunk inside, fighting for life. Colburn's face was brown, seamed with sun and wind, and his hair was white, although he was only a few years past forty.

"Like that girl, kid?"

"Yes," Riley said. "More than I would have believed."

"That's good. A man should have a wife. She's the salt of the earth." Colburn threw down his cigarette. "Look, kid. I know how you feel, but you were never an outlaw. Sure, you rode with us, you helped us, you profited from it. But your heart wasn't in it. He—" he nodded toward the house to indicate the wounded man—"saw it plain. Several of these cattlemen here were plenty careless with an iron when they first started out. You've quit, you've showed this past year that you had it in you, so don't let what happened keep you away from that girl. She'd be lucky to get you."

He hitched up his belts and pre-

pared to turn away.

"When the fever's out of Weaver," he said, "let him rest awhile. We're drifting."

Riley shook his head. "No, Jim," he said. "If you go, I go with you."

Colburn's face hardened. "What does that mean?"

"It means you're not leaving." Riley Branam put a hand on the door jamb. "Look, Jim. Weaver's fighting it out now. He's lucky to have the chance. Parrish had a narrow escape just awhile back. The odds are against you now. You know it, you all know it."

"So then?"

RILEY said, "McNary said he saw I was taking on some new hands. That gave me an idea. I'll need hands to work the stock. We've got only a few hundred head now, but I've made a deal to buy five hundred head of mixed stuff. It will have to be branded. You've got a first-class Morgan stallion there. There's some mountain meadows with thousands of acres that could make the greatest horse pasture in the world and could be fenced by closing two draws. I figure we can raise saddle stock. What I mean is, you've ridden your last trail. You boys stay here, where you belong."

Jim Colburn hesitated, his face working. His eyes strayed over the hills, then down to the long sagebrush flats. He rubbed his palms down over his jeans. It would be a good thing to rest quiet, a good thing to have friends again, to sit in the sun and smoke, to smell the branding fires and handle the irons.

Kehoe ran his hand over the flank of his horse. Its hide was hot in the sun. The horse stamped a hoof, switching a tail at the flies.

"I think the kid's right, Jim," Kehoe said.

Colburn turned his head. "Parrish?"

"I never want to hear another owl hoot, Jim."

Colburn nodded. It was right and good. Times were changing. It had taken rough men to tame the West, and some of them had become wild themselves in the process, but only a fool will not learn. He had taken money with a gun—now he could pay for it with hard work and a building hand.

It was one of the reasons they had always held so tightly together, because each, in his own mind, knew the others were the same. They had been wild cowboys when they were younger; now they were men, and it was time to draw a line.

"All right, kid," Colburn sat quietly. "We're workin' for you. . . ."

Four miles away beside Dry Creek, Strat Spooner drew up his horse and lifted a hand. Behind him eighteen tough gun-hands, including Gus Enloe and Valentz, swung their horses in toward the creek and stopped.

"Take a rest." Spooner swung from the saddle. "When we go in, we'll go fast. There'll be for or five men there, and that one in bed. Shoot to kill." He grinned, baring his yellowed teeth. "This time the law's with us."

Squatting down on the bank of Dry Creek he went on, "They won't be expecting us, so it should be a cinch. Gus—" he looked up at the gunman in the calfhide vest—"circle and come down from behind the house. Throw a couple of rounds into the bunkhouse door for luck, shoot into the windows of the house, then sweep by the stables. Take six men with you.

"Nick, you take four men and come down the draw to cut off any escape to Lost Mountain. I'll take the rest and come right up from the valley. We'll ride slow until we're right in sight, then take it through fast. In that first swoop, shoot anybody that ain't on a horse."

Spooner lit a cigarette and grinned past it, his hard-boned face shining a little with sweat.

"It may not take more'n five minutes," he said then, and looked up at the gunman again. "Gus, soon's the shooting is over, you take your boys and those Nick has, round up all that

beef and start it back up the draw. There's a narrow trail goes over Buck Ridge. Just get those cows over it and keep 'em moving into Lonesome Pocket. Hole up there and wait."

Valentz chuckled. "Now, Strat, that there's what I call figuring!"

Spooner got up and dropped his cigarette, grinding it out with a toe. "All right, boys. Move out. When we rush the place, come on in—*fast!*"

DAN SHATTUCK crossed Dry Creek not three miles below the assembly point of the Spooner gang. He drew up there, staring toward a dust cloud ahead.

"Cattle," he muttered. "Quite a bunch to make that much dust."

Nevertheless, he rode on. In his pocket was a printed note:

> If you want evidence—ten head of Running S steers are penned up behind Sugarloaf—they are fresh branded to 5 B.

The note was unsigned, but 5 B was the Branam brand, and Dan Shattuck's face was stiff as he rode. Eager as he was to apprehend the rustlers in the Rimrock country, he feared to discover that Riley Branam was actually the rustler, for that Marie was in love with Riley was obvious.

Yet, little as the evidence might be, the finger pointed at Branam. Despite Shattuck's suspicions, he had not failed to observe the hard work Branam had applied to the Lost Mountain ranch. And rustlers did not like to work.

Crossing Dry Creek, he looked north, watching the dust cloud as he cut through the sagebrush levels. A gleam of sunlight on metal brought a pucker to his brow. That looked like a flash from a rifle.

But who would be moving in such force?

The three-hundred-foot hump of the Sugarloaf loomed ahead of him, and he worked his way through the greasewood and rounded the mountain. The corral was there, but empty. When he rode up to it, the bars were down and there was no sign that cattle had even grazed here in months.

He got down from his horse and walked around, scowling thoughtfully. And then he stopped.

Martin Hardcastle stepped down from a clump of rocks and brush, and in his hand he held a gun.

"You were mighty hard on me, Shattuck." Newcastle's triumph was thick in his throat. "Now I'm going to kill you! And I'll never be suspected. Larsen will lay it to that outlaw kid, Branam."

Yet there was one thing happening

SHARP REPLY

A Texas pioneer was very proud of his ax. He boasted that he had used the same ax for twenty-seven years.

"You mean," said a stranger one day, "that you have really used that same ax day after day for twenty-seven years?"

"That's right," said the old-timer proudly. "And all hit's ever needed was six new heads and nine new handles."

—Al Spong

upon which Hardcastle had not counted. That was the fact that the half-witted Mexican boy, known as Chata because of his flat nose, had a hero.

Chata lived in abject fear of Hardcastle, and obeyed his every demand. In return, Newcastle fed him, gave him a corner of the stable in which to sleep, and tolerated him. Chata, he knew, did not talk. Chata kept his secrets inviolate. It might have been better—for him—if Chata had talked a little, but the Mexican had never spoken of his hero.

That idol, whom Chata worshiped, was a man of his own people. He was that bulldogger and roper, that top-hand and hunter, that skillful Pico.

And Pico, riding in from the southwest, met Chata on the trail. Curious, he asked questions, and Chata was eager to oblige. He had taken a message from Hardcastle to Shattuck.

What message? He did not know. He could not read English. Only one word he knew, and that from the packages and sacks in the store. It was Sugar," with a Big "S."

Pico thought quickly. He was remembering Hardcastle's wanting to marry Marie, and Shattuck's scornful reply. Pico had never believed that would end it. Now a mesage. What message?

Was the note signed? This Chata knew. He knew what a signature was, and he knew Hardcastle's signature. It had not been.

A trap—and a perfect time for a trap! Pico had a conniving brain of his own, and he thought he saw—

But Sugar—

Pico clapped Chata on the shoulder. "You're a good man, Chata," he said, and started to ride on.

Chata was pleased. A compliment from his idol was like a benediction. If this news pleased Pico, maybe if he told more—

"They are all riding," he said. "They are to kill everybody at Lost Mountain."

A few questions and answers. Pico saw it clearly now. Under cover of the attack on the 5 B, he saw the murder of Dan Shattuck.

"Chata," Pico said swiftly, "ride fast! To the sheriff. Tell him what you have told me. Tell him it must be Sugarloaf, and I'm going there."

Pico had never been known to spur a horse. He spurred one now.

VII

AT LOST MOUNTAIN Weaver was conscious and resting easily. His fever seemed to be broken, and he looked around at the house and grinned weakly at Riley.

"Looks like I figured right, kid."

Riley nodded. "You boys took care of me. Now I'll take care of you."

Kehoe's saturnine face appeared in the door. "Riley, crowd coming."

Riley Branam turned swiftly. A bunch of men could mean nothing but trouble. He stepped to the door, lifting his fieldglasses from the hook as he moved. He adjusted them. Through the dust he could see the glint of sunlight on rifles. There was a smaller cloud of dust further north.

"Trouble," he said swiftly. "Get inside and load up. There're three rifles and an express gun."

Riley ran for the bunkhouse. At his yell, Colburn apeared in the door. "Cruz to the house!" Riley said quickly. "Jim, you stick here with Parrish. If it's fight they want, they'll get it!"

Darby Lewis was coming down the draw when he saw the horsemen ahead of him. He had quit the 5 B, then had changed his mind and started back. He drew up, watching.

He knew these riders. He had himself rustled cattle with some of them. He had never liked Nick Valentz, and watching him now, Darby Lewis knew suddenly the time had come for him to take a stand.

It was a strange decision, for Darby was a drifter with the currents. He had always taken the line of least resistance. Now, suddenly, his way was

clear for the first time he could remember, and he knew what it meant to ride for a brand.

He knew a sneak attack when he saw one, too. He shucked his rifle from the scabbard, glanced toward a mountain trail that offered an escape. And then he fired.

It was a deliberate miss. He could not shoot a man in the back.

Valentz whirled, his fury at being discovered twisting his face. His gun swung up and Lewis fired again. A man near Valentz cried out and swung. Lewis fired once more, felt something smash into him, then he was racing for the rocks. Four rifles blasted, and he felt the smash of bullets. With a shock he realized he'd copped it good. He stoped his horse and swung from saddle.

He fell into the rocks, rolled over and shot twice into an oncoming rider. The man went backwards from his saddle, dead before he hit the ground, but not before Darby was dead.

Darby had quit, and it would take the buzzards to tell the survivors at Lost Mountain that he had returned.

At the shots, Strat Spooner swore and slammed the spurs into his mount. Gus Enloe yelled, and the three groups of horsemen converged.

They swept down upon five seasoned fighters with waiting rifles. But they swept down upon a strongly built house, a fortresslike bunkhouse, and a rambling gloomy stable in which Riley had decided to make his stand. He was on the roof. It was an adobe barn with a parapet around the roof and several loop-holes.

Colburn heard them coming but his eyes were on the trees back of the house.

"Up there," he said to Parrish. "You take those on the left, I'll take the right."

Riders burst from the trees and Colburn shot. His .44-40 took a yelling man in the throat, choking the yell off sharply. A horse stumbled and fell, the rider scrambled up, and Parish quickly dropped him.

Spooner and his riders swept through, united with the others, and swept on into the canyon where Darby Lewis had died.

Their surprise had failed. They had seen no enemies but Darby, whom they had killed. They had lost four men, and two others were wounded.

RILEY had not fired at all. He held his fire knowing the longer he kept his position undiscovered, the better. He heard glass crash in the house, heard the heavy boom of a buffalo gun, and knew that Spooner would not try another such rush. From now on it would be tougher. It would be moving, sniping, seeking out targets.

Riley kept down and watched. Twice he saw moving men, crawling for position. He held his fire, studying the situation. He chose three possible targets, drew a bead on each, swinging rapidly from one to the other.

He made three dry runs, then settled down.

A gun thundered and again glass crashed. Then a volley, all shots concentrated on the house. One of Riley's targets was a man in a checked shirt. He lifted himself to his knees, invisible from the house or bunkhouse and drew a bead on the house. And Riley shot him, saw his hands fly up, heard the rattle of the rifle on the rocks, and was already firing at a second man, then a third.

He hunkered down, looked again. The man in the checkered shirt lay sprawled on blood-stained rocks, checked out. His second shot had been a clean miss, the third a scratch—or maybe more.

Moving along the roof, Riley studied the situation with care. Short of a ricochet or carelessness, his own friends were securely intrenched, although without the mobility that he possessed. He had an idea that more than one of the Spooner outfit was already wishing he was far away.

He had seen Spooner, and he had seen Nick Valentz. Spooner had moved off among the trees, but Valentz and two men were working down toward the rear of the house, which would put them out of sight for him.

He chanced a quick shot, missed, and rolled along the roof as bullets knocked dust from adobe bricks where he had been. He felt the itch of adobe dust on his neck, and went to the trap and lowered himself from the roof into the hay loft.

He saw the man as the man saw him, and swung the rifle, firing from the hip. Their bullets crossed in flight. The man in the doorway missed. Riley did not. He dropped behind baled hay and got three bullets into the woods at a hidden marksman.

A man darted for a window, and a gun roared from the bunkhouse and the man dropped out there. He started to lift his gun and when bullets dusted him on both sides he lay still.

They did not like it. There were gun-hardened men in the lot, but there also were loafers and saddle-bums with no taste for fighting. From somewhere, Riley heard the diminishing hoofbeats of a horse. Of two horses. Somebody had had enough.

Kehoe appeared suddenly, outside the house. He glanced toward the barn, lifted a hand, then waited, gun poised. Apparently he could hear something or see something beyond the corner of the corral. Then Riley saw them see each other—the man was Nick Valentz. Kehoe had said he knew him.

Valentz fired and missed. Kehoe shot, then shot again, and put in a finishing shot as Valentz folded.

Silence descended and hung heavily. Off in the hills, thunder rolled and rumbled with a boom that sounded like rolling barrels down a stone corridor.

Riley Branam knew how the raiders felt. The surprise had failed, and this was no quick, slashing attack and victory. It had settled down to a deadly duel between seasoned fighting men, all dead shots, and a scattering of renegades.

More horses galloped away, and now there was only an occasional defiant shot. Working as a team, Kehoe and Riley went into the woods. The remaining men began to withdraw. There was an exchange of shots, then it was over, with a drum beat of hooves.

Of the nineteen men in all who had attacked, seven were dead.

GUS ENLOE thought Spooner must be dead, because he had not seen him for some time. It was Gus, his calfskin vest still intact, who led the shattered remnants back to Rimrock. There were only seven to lead, and two of them were wounded, one barely able to sit his saddle.

Strat Spooner was not dead. He was halfway to he Running S, and riding with care.

He had realized before any of them that they had failed, and that there would be repercussions. Larsen was not a man to accept any excuse a mob could give him for taking the law into their own hands—and such a mob. It would be the same with him, no matter who the victims were to have been.

And Spooner was thinking of Marie Veyre. He had been thinking of her most of the day. There would be nobody at the ranch but the girl and the cook. Maybe Shattuck, but he would not be able to stop Strat Spooner. And Strat had made up his mind to leave the country anyway.

He came down the bench above Beaver Head and scanned the ranch. Horses in the corral, none saddled. No sound, no movement. He took the trail, working his way down.

The cook, a man with a bad limp, came to the door and threw out some water. He did not look in Spooner's direction.

Strat drew up and rolled a smoke

while he studied the place. Shattuck always kept a horse saddled for riding, but none was in sight now. Therefore he must be gone.

He heard the piano being played in the house, and his tight-skinned face twisted in a slight smile as he walked his horse out of the greasewood and mesquite and rode into the yard. He swung down and walked lazily up to the door.

Glancing into the bunkhouse as he passed, he had seen nobody. Only the cook was here then—and Marie.

He took his time, drawing deep on his smoke. The music continued. Strat Spooner walked up to the kitchen door and pushed it open. . . .

Elsewhere things had happened and were happening. Martin Hardcastle had not talked long. He had taken his moment of gloating, and Dan Shattuck had made his try. It had failed.

Hardcastle had shot twice. His first shot scored but the second missed. This Hardcastle had not known. Shattuck had fallen. Walking over to him, Hardcastle had looked down and smiled.

"You ain't dead yet, but you will be. I want you to take it slow. There ain't nobody, maybe for months, going to come over here. So just lie there and die slow."

He had gone to his horse and swung up, then lazily walked the horse back.

"Buzzards pretty quick," he said, "before you die. You think about turning me off like you done."

Hardcastle had swung his horse and walked it away. When he reached the base of Sugarloaf, he glanced back. It would be his last chance for a sight of the man he had shot.

It was his last chance for a lot of things, for when he looked around again he saw a rider. It was Pico!

Hardcastle did not carry a rifle and it was too far for a pistol shot. He wheeled his horse and tried to make a run for it.

Pico got down from his own saddle. Resting his rifle in a notch on a rock, he took careful aim, held his breath, saw the sights darken with Hardcastle's back, and squeezed off his shot.

The heavy slug nicked Hardcastle's spine, glanced up and tore through his neck muscles, breaking his collar bone. His horse ran on—riderless.

An hour later, still alive but paralyzed from the hips down, Hardcastle saw the first buzzard in the darkening blue of the sky. It swung above him in a wide, slow circle. And then there were two.

Dan Shattuck had not been dead when Pico got to him. The big Mexican worked swiftly. He built a fire, heated water, bathed the wound. He bandaged it with a poultice made of herbs, an Indian remedy his mother had taught him to make. Then he got Dan into the shade and built a signal fire. . . .

IN THE sickroom in the 5 B ranch house, Weaver turned his head toward the window and listened. Kehoe had gone out during the last of the fighting and when it ended, Cruz had left the room.

There was still the acrid smell of gunpowder here. It was an old smell, a familiar smell.

The trail days were ended now, the boys settled. He had known this would come, and he had been right about the kid. Maybe when his sins and failures were totaled, this would count for something. Weaver lifted himself on his elbow and looked out the window, broken by rifle shots. The air was cool. It felt good on his face, fresh with the smell of pines.

Weaver knew at that minute that he was going to die.

He had been feeling better, had been looking around. He had enjoyed the sound of the guns. He had lived to that sound, he could die by it. He would have liked to have had one shot, but was too weak.

There was something yet to do. He pulled over a piece of brown paper sacking, and wrote painfully:

Last Will & Testimint of Ira Weaver. Everything to the kid, Riley Branam. Hang up your spurs, Jim, Parry and Kehoe. I'm lightin a shuck.
Ira Weaver

He laid back on the bed and looked up at the roof.

"Damn it," he said softly, and he smiled. "I got my boots off!" Slightly amazed, and quite pleased, he died.

VIII

SHERIFF LARSEN rode into the ranchyard at Lost Mountain and looked around. He glanced at Colburn, then at Parrish Neither man said a word. Larsen walked by them to look at the body of Nick Valentz, then at the others.

"Goot shooting," he said, and listended to Riley's quiet account of it.

He was with them when they found Weaver, and he went back outside with Riley and Colburn. He walked to his saddle and got up into leather.

"You got goot hands, boy," he told Riley. "Keep them working."

He looked past Riley at Jim Colburn.

"Last time I see you I vorked in a store in Dodge," he said. "You rode segundo for the Pierce trail herd. You vas a goot hand." He gathered the reins. "I chudge a man by his actions," he said, and walked his horse away.

Jim Colburn looked after him, and then he said, "Riley, I never thought I'd really *like* a sheriff." He turned. "One last order from your old boss, and then you're the boss. Go see that girl—now!"

Strat Spooner was a careful man and he knew the penalties for molesting a woman. So far as he was aware only the old cook and the girl were on the place. But he meant to be sure. No overt act until he *was* sure.

He could not know it, but he had arrived at the Running S at approximately the same moment Larsen had reached the Lost Mountain place.

He shoved open the kitchen door.

"How's for coffee?" he asked, looking past the cook at the open door leading to the front of the house.

Cookie knew Strat Spooner, and he felt a little start of fear. What was the man doing out *here?*

"Sure," he said, and poured coffee, then set out a large slab of apple pie.

He did not like Strat Spooner, and pie was a luxury, yet he wanted to keep the man busy.

Why was he here? The boss was gone, the hands were on the west range, Pico was gone.

The piano music ceased, there was a click of heels on the hall floor, then the door was opened wider and Marie Veyre stepped into the kitchen. She stopped abruptly on seeing Spooner.

The big gunman's eyes appraised her and he smiled.

"Howdy, ma'am," he said. "Glad to see you looking so well."

Her blouse was tight across her breasts and suddenly again Marie was entirely too conscious of it. She turned to Cookie.

"Uncle Dan will be back soon. You can start supper whenever you like."

"You missed the shooting," Strat told her slowly. He leaned back in his chair. "Fellers raided that Lost Mountain place."

She turned sharply around. Her eyes were large, her face white. Spooner divined the reason. He had seen her talking to Riley Branam.

"He's got fighting friends," Spooner told her. "Never figured he was much hisself. Never seen anybody he buried. but I always figured to have a go at him my own self."

"He would kill you," Marie said, her voice cool.

"I don't figure so." Spooner chuckled. "Glad to know Shattuck ain't here. That was the one thing had me puzzled."

Cookie turned slowly, his tongue touching his lips. There was no gun in the kitchen. He glanced across toward the knives but Spooner was watching him.

Fully aware of what both were thinking, Spooner took his time. He had no idea where Shattuck was, but he did have an idea that it was nowhere close. He had not known Hardcastle's plans, but the saloonkeeper was not as devious as he had believed, and Spooner had believed Hardcastle's plans had something to do with Shattuck.

Marie turned and started back into the front of the house but Strat's voice stopped her.

"Take it easy, Marie." He got to his feet, his hard-boned face lazy, but his eyes were hard and hot. "I ain't through talking."

"Here!" Cookie stepped forward and Strat swung a backhand blow with a heavy crockery coffee cup. The move was swift, Cookie tried to duck, but the blow took him on the temple. He collapsed without a sound.

MARIE ran to him, her face stricken. "You—you've killed him!"

"Maybe," Spooner took a deep drag on the cigarette he had relighted. "I doubt it."

Swiftly he stooped and before Marie could jerk herself away, he caught her arm and pulled her to him. Then with her under one arm, kicking and struggling, he pushed open the door and strode, spurs jingling, into the big hall.

In the living room he dropped her on a divan and stepped back, grinning. "No use to make all this fuss," he said. "It ain't going to do you a mite of good." He flicked the ash from his cigarette and grinned at her. "And you better hope Shattuck don't get home. If he does, I might have to kill him."

"Pico will come!" she said defiantly.

Marie watched him, more frightened. He was so sure of himself, so confident.

"That Mex don't worry me none." Strat crossed the room and picked up a bottle from a serving table and walked back. He took a drink, then handed it to her. "Help yourself. Don't say I ain't generous."

"I don't drink."

He chuckled, enjoying himself. His eyes flickered to the windows. Amused as he might be, he was still a cautious man.

"Have one anyway," he said.

"No!"

The amused smile left his lips and he studied her coldly. "You drink," he said. "You take it now or I'll force it down you."

He shoved the bottle and she took it, then deliberately she struck at him. He jumped back, then in a movement so swift it seemed unbelievable in so big a man, he struck the bottle from her hand and slapped her.

The blow knocked her down, but quickly she scrambled to her feet, her head ringing, and got around the table. He watched her, unhurried. He picked up the fallen bottle and took another drink, then put it down. He made no move to come around the table after her, but took the near edge and began to draw it toward the wall.

There was no place to go. There was no weapon in the room.

And then she heard a walking horse outside.

Strat Spooner heard it, too. His head came around sharply, and instantly, she screamed:

"Look *out!*"

Spooner swore and lunged to the side of the door, gun in hand. It did not open.

Strat Spooner peered out. A riderless horse stood in the yard. It was Dan Shattuck's horse.

He straightened and laughed, then turned to Marie.

"Honey," he said, "Shattuck ain't coming back. His horse just showed without him."

Marie ran to the window, unmindful of Spooner. Dan Shattuck's gray stood quietly, one rein dangling, the other still looped on the horn.

A floor board creaked and she dodged just in time, for Spooner had

been almost upon her. Swiftly she ducked away, throwing a chair in his path. He stopped for another drink, took it, and came on. . . .

Riley Branam saw that riderless horse, too, trotting toward the ranch house. He knew that horse, and instantly divined that Shattuck had been injured or killed. He started to backtrack, but decided to ride on to the ranch to break the news to Marie.

He had almost reached the kitchen door when he saw Spooner's horse! He had seen Spooner riding that horse on the first wild dash through the 5 B yard.

In an instant he was out of saddle. Moving to the kitchen door, he pushed it carefully open and stepped in. Cookie lay on the floor, his hair bloody.

From an inner room came the crash of a chair, then a low laugh. Riley tiptoed to the door, moved into the room. Spooner was facing the girl, half turned toward him.

RILEY moved another step forward. He could see the panic on Marie's face and there arose in him something cold and dangerous.

Never in his life had he felt like this, not even as a boy when—

"Hello, Strat," he said softly.

Marie gasped, and Strat's shoulders bunched as if he'd been struck. The big gunman turned slowly, his face still. He looked at Riley, then beyond him.

Branam was alone.

"Hello, Riley." Spooner knew what he was going to do, and he was smiling now, a cold smile. "Ready to die?"

Spooner took a quick step and stood directly between Riley Branam and Marie! Now Marie was directly in the line of fire.

Yet even as he stepped, Marie had recognized his purpose. As Spooner dropped a hand for a gun. Marie hit the floor. Spooner heard her, but his gun was already swinging up.

Riley Branam felt that coldness inside him, that stillness. He took a step to th left to place Marie still more out of the line of fire, and palmed his gun.

Spooner's first shot burned Riley's neck. Riley winced, then fired. His gun was hip high, his elbow against his hip-bone and the gun muzzle turned slightly inward. As the gun bucked in his hand Strat backed up a step. Riley fired a second time, the bullet striking Spooner's gun and, glancing upward, ripped a wide gash in the gunman's throat under the chin.

Spooner blinked his eyes and backed up again. Then he steadied himself and fired twice, holding carefully. Riley Branam felt the bullet hit and felt his leg go out from under him. He heard the next bullet whip by, then he was on the floor and he was numb.

Was this how it felt to die? He looked suddenly into the eyes of Marie and knew he could not die—yet.

He rolled over and pushed himself up, rocking back on his heels. He lifted his gun, which seemed impossibly heavy and saw Strat Spooner still standing there, his throat and shirt front blotched with blood. Riley could actually see blood flowing from the throat wound. His first bullet had struck Spooner in the stomach and it also was bleeding.

Eyes wild and terrible, Strat Spooner looked down at Riley and brought his own gun up. Both fired. Splinters stung Riley's cheek, and his ear-drum went dead with the crash of the bullet.

Spooner was still standing, though, and he began to walk forward. Riley shot twice into his body, then dropped his gun and dived feebly at the man's legs. Strat came down in a heap, his face, turned toward Riley, the face of a living dead man. He grabbed at Riley's throat with huge hands, fingers spread, and Marie screamed.

Riley struck at those rigid fingers, then threw himself back and got to one knee. Spooner tried to get up, also. He got his legs under him, and

with the painful precision and carefully calculated effort of a drunken man, tried to straighten up.

He fell back to his knees. Panting hoarsely, gouts of blood coming from his throat, he tried again. It seemed almost impossible.

Awe-struck, Riley and Marie saw Spooner slowly push himself erect. He looked carefully around.

"Throwed," he said distinctly, then added a word that was choked off by blood.

He took two fast steps forward and smashed violently into the wall. He fell then, and rolled over on his side, gradually stretching out to his full length.

He took two long shuddering breaths then, while Riley and Marie huddled close together.

And then he did not breathe any more and he was dead.

IF YOU should come, in the passing of years, to the sagebrush flats below Lost Mountain, listen to the wind. It might tell a story, and point the way to a graveyard near an abandoned town site.

Rimrock is gone. There's another town thirty miles away. The foundations of Rimrock are left, and some of the graves there are kept up. Ira Weaver is buried there beside Dan Shattuck, who lived to see his second grandchild, and Sheriff Larsen, who died at ninety-two.

Kehoe married Peg Oliver, and they had four sons. One of them was killed in Korea, and one's making movies now about the wild, wild days in the West.

Kehoe was elected sheriff when Larsen retired, and Parish became his deputy

Parrish was killed, finally, in a bank stickup. Two Chicago boys, one of them with a tommy-gun. They went out together, all three of them, right in the street.

His last words were, "Colburn planned 'em better!"

Colburn lived out his time at Lost Mountain and people often looked him up to ask questions about the bad old days.

He answered them, and his mild old eyes were always a little amused because none of them ever asked about his own life. He was such a quiet, soft spoken man.

Mr. and Mrs. Riley Branam fared the best of all, both in material things and happiness. Though they never had any children, they had each other and everything that money, friendship and vast respect could buy. Their love for one another was one of those rare undying affairs, almost legendary now.

And even today, should you come unheralded to Lost Mountain, you'd likely catch them holding hands.

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By JOSEPH CHADWICK

Measure Your Man

Was it because the girl loved Marlowe that he hated him?

■ If anybody had asked what he wanted most out of life, Ed Nolan would have just grinned and shrugged. The refused answer would have been: Victoria Blaine. Ed had been in love with Tory, as she was called, ever since the day he'd noticed that she was grown up.

Wanting Tory was one thing, having her another. There was no law against a hired hand courting his boss's daughter, maybe, but Ed Nolan figured that the Old Man, Matt Blaine, had made him the Circle B foreman because he could be trusted to go the limit on the job—and no farther. Every man wanted

the best for his daughter, Ed figured, and a tough-hided, saddle-gaunted ramrod wasn't much of a catch as a husband—or as a son-in-law.

Besides, Tory was young and as pretty as a pinto filly, while Ed was as old as the hills and as about as rough-hewn.

He was over the thirty mark, by a couple of months.

By then a man who has spent twenty years in the saddle no longer knows the feel of youth. When Ed Nolan shaved, the blurry mirror in the bunkhouse showed him a weather-beaten face and a few gray hairs at his temples. It was an all right face, rugged but not unhandsome, but not one a girl with any choice would want to look at over the breakfast table. Ed was ten years older than Tory. He'd been at the Circle B, a range orphan, when she was born.

But even if she was as far beyond his reach as the moon, Ed wanted to see Tory happy. It was as he'd told the man who was going to have her, "So help me, Marlowe, I'd kill the man who gave her reason to cry."

He'd said that just this morning.

He'd said it without anger, without malice. But he'd said it to Bart Marlow's face in dead earnest.

There were no tears in Tory's eyes, only the happy reflection of her smile. She had wide brown eyes flecked with gold. Her hair was auburn, and the sunlight brought out all its bright coppery hue. She defied the sun; she rode with her hat hanging at her shoulders by its chin strap. She wore a flannel shirt and levis, and plain 'puncher boots. She rode like a man.

She rode up to Ed Nolan as he bossed the crew on calf roundup on the south range. The calf crop was good this spring. The Circle B ran white-faced stock, still a new breed to Arizona Territory. The Old Man was always a jump ahead of other ranchers, though it had been Ed Nolan who had put him this jump ahead. Ed had talked Matt Blaine into introducing Hereford blood into his Texas longhorn stock three years ago.

"Busy, Ed?" Tory asked.

"Well, no."

"Good, I want to talk," Tory said. "Ed, I'm going to marry Bart."

"Figured so," Ed said, looking at her now—seeing the clean beauty of her. He took out makings, started a cigarette. "I wish you happiness."

"I wanted to tell you first of al You approve?"

"Does my approval matter?"

"Yes. For if you approve, so will Dad."

ED WAS silent. He lighted his cigarette. Tory's father was away on a trip. Tory wouldn't surprise Matt much; the Old Man knew that she had fallen for Bart Marlowe. Tory studied Ed, her smile fading.

"Ed, you don't," she said huskily. "You don't approve."

"Tory, let me out of this."

"You don't like Bart. Why?"

"I like Bart, all right. Fact is, everybody likes Bart." Ed tossed his unsmoked cigarette to the ground. "I guess," he said, "I am busy." He lifted his reins.

Tory said sharply, "Maybe you're afraid Bart wants your job!"

"No."

"What, then? What have you got against him? Ed, I want to know!"

He looked at her frowningly. "Look, Tory; your dad's not going to disapprove. Bart's the son of the best friend Matt Blaine ever had. That's all that is important to you. I'm just a hired hand, not one of the family. What I feel about Bart Marlowe is mine alone."

"Ed," said Tory again, "I want to know!"

"All right, Tory. He's weak. Somehow, there's a weakness in him."

She stared at him in disbelief. "Bart—weak? That's crazy, Ed! He was hired as a bronc buster, and he's a good one. He's been here only six months, and Dad says he's one of our

best hands." She was angry now. "You've got to admit that, too. How is he weak? What is his weakness?"

Ed said, "I don't rightly know, Tory," and rode away.

HE MADE a swing down across the south range on the pretense of seeing that the hands didn't miss any unbranded calves. Actually, he wanted to be alone with his thoughts. His talk with Tory had left him in a bleak mood. It was bad enough being in love with her, secretly and hopelessly, without quarreling with her over the man she was to marry. Maybe it was jealousy that made him doubt that Marlowe was good enough for Tory. He almost suspected it.

But he had that feeling about Marlowe. It had been with him from the day the man rode up to Circle B headquarters and introduced himself as the son of Matt Blaine's old friend, and Ed had told himself then, *There's something wrong about this buckaroo.*

It hadn't been anything Ed Nolan could put a finger on. Bart Marlowe from Texas was a good hand with horses and cattle; he was handsome and brash, quick to laugh and everybody's friend, something of a dude in his dress on a Saturday night in town. He was quite a talker. He'd been everywhere and seen everything, but it was hard to tell if he was just bragging. There'd been one thing that Ed Nolan had noticed: Bart Marlowe didn't like to be questioned too closely about his past. In town, Marlowe drank and gambled and flirted with the honkytonk girls. Still, Ed Nolan couldn't tell the nature of Marlow's weakness. Most young ranch hands acted no different. But a man who successfully bossed a ranch crew had to know men as well as horses and cattle, and Ed Nolan had an instinct for sizing up riders who came to the Circle B—and he was seldom mistaken in his estimate.

There was a weakness in Bart Marlowe. There was something off-color about the man. Tory had asked, and Ed Nolan had answered her.

Two of the crew came hazing a bunch of cows and calves in from the west, and one, Hutch Burton, called, "A strange rider camped over by the Morada, Ed."

Nodding, Ed turned in the direction of Morada Creek. It was a shallow stream in a deep arroyo, the main watering place for the cattle on the south range. It flowed from springs in the low hills just beyond the west boundary of the spread, and across the hills was the malpais. Circle B did not call passing riders "trespassers," but a strange rider in camp on the Morada deserved a look. It meant that he'd either come in from the badlands or up from the Border, and mostly honest men didn't come in such roundabout ways.

The stranger was camped in the shade of a cottonwood. He'd just finished a meal cooked on a small fire, and, except for the wary look in his eyes, he was taking it easy. He sat with his back to the thick trunk of the tree, a heavy-set man with a broad and ugly face in need of a razor. His horse, a spur-scarred sorrel, was staked out in the shade. The man's clothes and saddle were hard worn. *A tough customer,* Ed Nolan decided, reining in.

"Howdy," he said. "You drifting through?"

"Maybe. If I can't get a job here."

"Sorry. We've got a full crew."

"I'll still ask for a job, mister," the hardcase drawled.

"No need to ask," said Ed. "You've got your answer. I'm foreman of this outfit. The owner is away." He wouldn't have hired this man except in an emergency. "If you're heading east, you'll hit San Marco before dark. If you're heading north, you'll come to our headquarters by sundown. You're welcome to stop for supper."

The man said sarcastically, "Thanks. Nothing like meeting up with friendly people." He took out makings, started

rolling a cigarette.

When Ed turned away, the hardcase said, "I'll be heading north. I hear a friend of mine is working at Circle B."

"Who's that?"

"Name of Marlowe. Bart Marlowe."

Ed was surprised and suspicious. He had his doubts about Bart Marlowe but he couldn't believe that the man was friendly with this hardcase. Ed said, "You can see Marlowe at ranch headquarters. But there's still no job open here."

He rode on, wondering where and how Bart Morlwe had come to know a tough customer like that.

EARLY in the spring, Matt Blaine had bought a big bunch of wild horses from a mustanger at a dirt cheap price. He'd put Bart Marlowe to breaking them, and Marlowe worked at the Circle B horse camp up in Squaw Canyon. The bronc-buster was already in when Ed Nolan rode up to headquarters at sundown, just ahead of the crew, and the drifter was with him. They were standing in front of the adobe bunkhouse, talking intently, and Marlowe for once wasn't laughing. He was scowling.

Leaving the drifter, Ed Marlowe came over to the corrals where Ed was off-saddling. He hadn't Ed height, but he was full bodied. He had a ruddy complexion, brown curly hair, china blue eyes. He moved with a swagger. Usually his tone was overly friendly. Now it was demanding.

"Ed, those mustangs were supposed to be saddle broke before Matt gets back from his trip," Marlowe said. "The job's too much for one man, considering the time allowed. I want some help. How about putting Rod Barney on? He's a good hand with a rough string."

"No. The payroll is as high as Matt wants it."

"I'll fix it with the boss when he gets back."

"No," said Ed. "That's final."

Marlowe's handsome face turned stubborn. "I'm asking it," he said flatly, "because you're ranch boss. But it'll be all right with Matt Blaine even if you say 'no.' I'm putting Rod on."

"You put him on, and I'll run him off."

"Damn if you will. Rod's a friend of mine," Marlowe said. He didn't look happy about having his friend there. He looked edgy, a little scared. "You'd better string along with me, Nolan. I'm going to marry Tory, and when I'm one of the family, you'll need me for a friend. I'll be more than a hired hand around here. Think it over."

"I'll do that," Ed said sourly. "But Rod Barney goes."

"Show him, Bart," Rod Barney said, coming up behind him. "Show him that you're not scared of this two-bit foreman. It's time you started showing him his place, now that you're marrying the boss' daughter."

He gave Marlowe a shove, one hard enough to slam him into Ed Nolan. Ed swung his left shoulder about, braced himself, and Marlowe's chin struck the point of Ed's shoulder. Marlowe had his mouth open, yelling a protest at Barney, and the impact jarred his mouth shut. Marlowe bit his tongue, and the pain made him howl. With pain came rage, and Marlowe, blaming not Barney or himself for the accident, spat blood and then struck out. He drove two wicked punches to Ed Nolan's body.

Ed rode with them both, feeling them but not their full power. He said thickly, "Quit it, you fool!"

But Morlowe—and maybe this was his weakness—had gone berserk. He hunched his shoulders, ducked his head, lunged, both fists striking out. He bore Ed back as far as he could go, against the corral fence. There the ramrod, cornered, struck back. He was icy cool, grimly efficient. He straightened the bronc-buster, then, when Marlowe shilded his face and

head, Ed shifted his attack to body. He drove Marlowe away from him, then followed him up.

And Rod Barney got in behind him.

A voice cried out, Tory's voice. She came running.

Another voice said, "Don't hombre. Don't try it!" Hutch Burton's voice. Hutch and the others had just ridden in, and Hutch had a gun on Rod Barney. There was a sickening thump, a fist striking solidly against flesh, and Bart Marlowe fell sprawling. He lay on the ground and groaned, and Tory rushed forward and knelt by him. She saw that he was badly battered, dazed, and in pain, but not seriously injured. She looked up at Ed Nolan with a quick hate that hurt him far more than had any of Marlowe's blows.

"Don't think that this will be forgotten or forgiven," Tory said.

"Keep out of this," Ed told her. He swung toward Rod Barney. "Ride out, you," he ordered. "Don't let me catch you on Circle B range again."

The drifter backed off, then turned and quickened his step. When he was mounted, Rod Barney gave Ed Nolan —the entire Circle B crew—a sneering look. He turned his horse and rode east, toward town.

Tony was helping Marlowe up. Hutch Burton and Tim Evans dismounted and gave her a hand. Tory said, "Help me get him over to the house, boys." She ignored Ed Nolan except for another hate-filled look.

ED NOLAN was alone in the bunkhouse, sitting on his bunk, staring into space, a forgotten cigarette in his hand, when Hutch Burton came in. Hutch was old for a cowhand; he was a gray-haired, leathery-skinned man of close to sixty, and he'd been with Matt Blaine since the old days in Texas. He'd fathered Ed Nolan when Ed showed up at the Circle B as a homeless orphan, and the father-son relationship still held.

"He was faking it, Ed," Hutch said. "He wasn't bad hurt. He's playing on Tory's sympathies now. What was it all about?"

"Marlowe wanted me to hire on that drifter."

"A bad hombre, that drifter. Better watch your step until he's left these parts. Why'd Marlowe want him hired on?"

"Claims he needs help with those mustangs."

"He doesn't. It was some other reason."

"No," said Ed Nolan, and wondered why he should cover up for Bart Marlowe. It was because of Tory, of course. "No, I guess not," he added, and saw that old Hutch wasn't convinced.

Tory avoided him as though he were a drunken bronc Apache during the next few days, and that hurt Ed Nolan He had no more trouble with Bart Marlowe, however. More often than not now, Marlowe stayed overnight at the horse camp. When he did show up at ranch headquarters, to spend the evening with Tory, on the ranch house porch or in its parlor, he kept away from the bunkhouse. His fight with Ed Nolan, or maybe Rod Barney's visit had changed the bronc-buster. It was queer to see him come and go without hearing his loud talk and easy laughter. Marlowe was like a man nursing a grudge. Or like a man plagued by some sort of trouble.

It was a week after the fight, the day before the Old Man was expected home, that Hutch Burton rode in from the north range and told Ed Nolan, "That drifter's up at the horse camp."

Ed said, "So?" and saddled a horse, and rode north. When he got to Squaw Canyon, Bart Marlowe was alone and working with a roan mustang. Ed watched him for a time, and he had to admit that Marlowe was a good hand at breaking horses. Marlowe finally had the roan gentled enough to circle the corral at an easy lope. He dismounted, then, and removed saddle and bridle. He came

from the corral, wiping sweat from his face. He looked at Ed without saying anything.

"Rod Barney was here," Ed said, stating the fact and not asking a question. He saw the uneasy look come into Marlowe's eyes. "I'm hoping he's gone because you had the sense to send him away."

Marlowe said, "Think what you want," in an empty sort of voice.

"That drifter's bad medicine."

"Maybe that's just one man's opinion."

"Trouble follows his kind like a shadow," Ed said, puzzled by Marlow's manner. He'd expected a flare-up of temper. "You'd better stay clear of him, for your own good," Ed added, and still saw no signs that Marlowe was getting sore. He watched the bronc buster stand there with downcast eyes, twisting at the bandana he held like a nervous woman. He had a feeling that Marlowe wanted to say something. Ed leaned forward in the saddle. "What's Barney want of you, anyway?"

Marlowe looked up, startled.

He didn't get to answer, if answering was his intention, for now there was a drumming of hoofs. Tory came riding up to the camp on her paint pony. As usual, her hat hung at her shoulders. Her hair was bright in the sun. She was breathing hard, and her horse was blowing. She'd known that Ed had come to the horse camp, and she'd followed him—expecting trouble. She divided a look between him and Marlowe, then gazed steadily at Ed.

"The way I understood it," she said flatly, "Matt Blaine put Bart in charge of this horse camp and told him to break these mustangs in his own way. According to that, Bart should be his own boss up here."

"I guess you're right, Tory," Ed said, and turned his horse away.

He rode to San Marco after supper that night, but he didn't meet up with Rod Barney. He made some inquiries. Irish O'Dade, who ran the Shamrock Saloon, told him, "Yeah, that hardcase has been h a n g i n g around town for a week. Spends most of his time here. Early tonight a couple other hardcases showed up. They rode out together. Trouble, Ed?"

Ed said, "I don't know," and ordered a drink.

It was nearly midnight when he got back to the ranch, and the hands were asleep. Ed went to Hutch Burton's bunk and woke the old-timer. He asked if Bart Marlowe had been there tonight. Hutch said, "He rode in with Tory at sundown. He had supper at the house, then rode out just after dark. Something wrong?"

"No," Ed told him.

TORY had the buckboard hitched up in the morning and drove off to town to meet the stage that was bringing her father home from Tucson. Matt Blaine had gone to Tucson to a cattlemen's convention, but he'd had another reason for making the trip. He'd told no one except Ed Nolan about his real purpose in making the trip; Matt hadn't wanted anybody else to know that his heart was bothering him and that he was so worried that he was going to visit a doctor for the first time in his life.

Ed sent the crew out onto the range, but he stayed at headquarters to welcome the Old Man home. It was almost noon when Ed saw the buckboard returning, and Hutch rode in from the south range before the rig came in. The old cowhand's leathery face was expressionless, but his eyes were smouldering with anger.

"What's up, Hutch?" Ed asked.

"Rustlers," Hutch said. "A bunch of those yearling and two-year-old steers we threw across the Morada the other day are missing."

"How many?"

"About fifty."

"The rest of the boys know?"

"Not yet."

"Don't tell them," Ed said. "I don't

want the Old Man to know about this until I've made a try at getting those steers back. You try to pick up the trail, Hutch. I'll follow you soon as I talk to Matt."

The buckboard rolled up as Hutch swung away.

Matt Blaine was fifty-eight, a bit too florid of face and fat of body. He looked healthy, but looks could be deceiving. Any little effort made him puff. He'd complained, to Ed, of a lump in his throat and tightness in his chest. . . .

He told Ed to come to his office as soon as they had gripped hands, and once there with the door closed, Matt said, "The doc says I can live a long time, if I take it easy—blamed easy. I'll be riding a rocking-chair instead of a bronc from now on, Ed."

"You deserve to take it easy, Matt."

"Maybe, but I don't like the idea," the Old Man said. He sat at his desk and eyed Ed narrowly. "Victoria told me, Ed. What's your side of the story?"

"Forget it, Matt. I lost my temper, went off half-cocked."

"That's not like you," Matt said. "Look, Ed; Victoria wants to marry young Marlowe. I'm not saying I approve of him for her, but I'm going to give them my blessing. I'd always hoped that you—" He shrugged. "Ed, you're not going to quit me when this marriage comes off?"

"You're good at mind-reading, Matt."

"I know you, Ed. Don't let that idea get the best of you. I need you. Marlowe will never replace you. He's not man enough." Matt Blaine took a cigar from his pocket, scowling at it, threw it down onto the desk. "No smoking," he grumbled. "Doctor's orders. Give me your word, Ed, that you'll stay as long as I'm around?"

"I'll think it over, anyway," Ed said, turning to the door.

"Ed—"

"Yeah, boss?"

"You wanted Tory for yourself, didn't you?"

Ed gave him a bleak look. "I've got a chore to do," he said, and went out.

THEY spent the whole day trying to pick up the rustlers' trail, without any luck. By sundown, they weren't ready to call it quits but darkness would make further searching for tracks futile. Hutch Burton grumbled, "I tracked plenty of 'Paches in my time with better luck than this. Those cow thieves didn't head south toward the Border, and they didn't go west toward the badlands. They couldn't've driven rustled stock east, on account of Circle B's neighbors. You know what I figure, Ed?"

"Yeah. Those tricky sons drove 'em north."

"Right smack across Circle B range," Hutch said. "Maybe even within sight of Circle B headquarters' lights. Now who'd be that smart—and bold? You thinking what I'm thinking, Ed?"

"Maybe."

"They took the cattle off the south range instead of the north range so we'd figure they headed for the Border or the badlands," Hutch said. "They wanted us to chase 'em in the wrong direction. So they headed north across Circle B, then swung west through Squaw Canyon—"

"Bart Marlow's up there."

Hutch ignored Ed's interruption. "They went through the Squaw, hit the badlands up there," he ended up. "But we've still got a chance to catch 'em. Let's get going."

Ed Nolan's face was rocky with anger.

He was silent a long moment, thinking, then he made up his mind to something. "You head back to headquarters," he said flatly. "I'll handle this alone. Keep quiet about it. I don't want the Old Man to know about it. Or Tory, either." He cut short the protest Hutch started. "I know what I'm doing," he stated.

Sure, he knew. Because of Tory, he

was going to cover up for Bart Marlowe again.

It was fifteen miles to the horse camp in Squaw Canyon. Ed covered that distance in a little more than an hour and a half, and his horse was pretty well done in when he entered the narrow canyon. He dismounted and led the animal the last half mile to the cabin, letting it cool gradually.

A patch of yellow lantern light marked the camp, the cabin's open doorway, and Ed approached it without time-wasting precautions. He knew that Rod Barney and the two men riding with him wouldn't be loafing there, not with fifty steers worth at least forty dollars a head at some mining camp, where the butcher would pay the price—no questions asked, no brands read. Two thousand dollars would keep them on the move.

Ed sang out, "Hello, the cabin! You, Marlowe!"

There was no reply, and when he finally stepped into the doorway he saw Bart Marlowe sprawled on his bunk in a drunken stupor. An empty whisky bottle lay on the dirt floor. There was a pail of water beside the stone fireplace.

Ed crossed the room, picked up the pail, carried it to the bunk. He gave Marlowe the water, dousing him thoroughly, and the man gasped, sputtered, came around. Ed flung the pail aside, grabbed Marlowe and hauled him off the bunk. He slapped the bronc buster hard across the face, right and left cheek, and then saw awareness come into Marlowe's eyes. Marlowe reeled away, caught hold of the plank table, and well only as far as his knees. He looked sick.

"Lay off, Nolan!"

"How long ago did they go through the canyon?"

"I don't know what—what you're talking about."

"Never mind," Ed growled. He crossed to the fireplace, shoved a couple sticks of kindling into the bed of embers. The coffee pot was full, and he put it on to heat. "Why'd you throw in with Barney?" he demanded, turning back to Marlowe. "Not for money, I take it."

Marlowe stared at him, frightened, and didn't talk.

Ed said, "You didn't really want that drifter at Circle B. You were scared of him. You'd better be scared of me, hombre. I hate the guts of a cow thief." He drew his gun, cocked it, leveled it at Marlowe. This was all bluff, but he was counting on the man being too befuddled to realize that. "Talk'll save you, rustler, and nothing else!"

"Ed, you wouldn't—"

"Talk, dammit!"

Kneeling there, clinging to the table, Bart Marlowe must have believed that death stared him in the face. He talked. Rather, he mumbled.

"I got in with Barney a year ago in New Mexico," he told Ed Nolan. "There were five in the crowd. A stagecoach was held up and robbed of a mining company's payroll. I got scared afterward and wouldn't take any of the loot. But I'd been in on it, and when Barney showed up here he threatened to send word to the law back in New Mexico that I'd been in on the robbery. He saw his chance to make easy money stealing Circle B beef, with me helping him. I had to do it, Ed. I—"

"You cut fifty head out of the herd on the south range and drove them up here last night," Ed broke in. "Then Barney and his two partners took them on through the Squaw." He put his gun away. "Listen, Marlowe; you're going along to get those steers back. Get some of that coffee into you while I saddle a horse for you and a fresh mount for myself. You sober up, you hear."

"Barney'll fight! You don't know Barney!"

"You'll fight, too, hombre."

"If Barney gets away, he'll tip off the law about me!"

"Barney's not getting away," Ed

Nolan said. "Not if I can help it. I'm giving you a chance, Marlowe. We'll tell the folks that those rustlers jumped you, tied you up. You'll be in the clear with them."

Marlowe stared at him. "You mean—?" he muttered. "Why?"

"Because you're Tory's man," Ed said savagely. "Heaven help her, but you're what she wants. And you'll be the man she thinks you are!"

THEY rode out together—Ed Nolan grim and angry, Bart Marlowe sober now but sick and afraid. They rode at a lope through the darkness, Ed setting the pace, and in an hour they climbed from Squaw Canyon into the rock hills. Beyond the rocky uplifts lay the badlands, desert country, thirty miles across and twice as long. An immensity of wasteland in which could be hidden a herd twenty times as big as the one Rod Barney and his partners were driving. Its waterholes were few and far between, and a sudden doubt came to Ed Nolan.

"Where's Barney headed?" he demanded.

"Palisade."

"The truth, dammit!"

"I swear—"

"All right," Ed growled.

They swung northwest through the night. Palisade was a mining town, newly booming, a good place to unload stolen beef. It was forty miles distance, and the rustlers couldn't have reached it even if they'd driven as hard as they could without a single halt. Cattle traveled at a slow pace. Ed Nolan said, "Come on," and lifted his horse to a lope again.

They traveled a dozen miles across the malpais, Marlowe hanging back time and again, and finally saying, "It's no use. We've lost them." Ed gave him a look of disgust, but he knew that they had missed the rustlers in the darkness. The cattle hadn't gotten that far. Ed reined in. We'll wait here. We'll let them come to us."

Dawn was streaking the sky with pink when a rider topped a rocky rise a half mile away. The rider was Rod Barney. Behind him came the Circle B steers, gaunted already by being driven without rest, bawling for water. Two tough visaged riders brought up the drag, lashing out at stragglers with their ropes, cursing and shouting. Those two looked dead-beat, and the burly Red Barney appeared to be dozing in the saddle. His head was bowed, his bristly chin rested on his chest. . . .

Ed Nolan let them come on. He was hidden amid a jumble of boulders, his horse and Bart Marlowe, also hidden, behind him. Ed looked down the barrel of his .30-30, and he had Rod Barney's chest dead-centered.

Then Bart Marlowe's nerve cracked. The man broke and ran, raking his mount with rough spurs.

The sudden beat of hoofs roused Rod Barney, alerted his companions. Ed Nolan swore bitterly, looking after the fleeing Marlowe, then a gunshot crashed and a slug struck a boulder and ricochetted past his head. He swung back and saw Barney riding at him. The rustler yelled an order at his companions, and they left the cattle and rode to cut in around behind Ed. Barney didn't concern himself about Bart Marlowe. He fired again as Ed got out a shot, a wild one, and the slug tore into Ed Nolan's left side. He was thrown backwards against a boulder, and his side felt as though a red-hot iron was being jabbed into it.

Ed knew an instant of sheer panic, and knew himself for the fool he'd been. Trying to make a man of a weakling like Bart Marlowe. Trying to stop these trigger-quick rustlers alone when one word would have brought the whole Circle B crew along. Trying to give Tory what she wanted. Tory—Rod Barney loomed above him, ugly face grinning, gun levelled for the finishing shot. Ed Nolan fired by instinct, without con-

scious thought, the stock of the Winchester pressed against his thigh.

The slug, by some miracle, caught Rod Barney in the chest. It tore him from the saddle, spilled him to the ground in a lifeless heap. Teeth clenched, face dripping sweat, Ed Nolan turned and started shooting at the other two. One howled as he was bullet-creased, and swung away. The other fired a wild shot, then he too fled. They galloped off, empty-handed, looking back only to see if they were pursued, and finally disappearing.

Ed made it to the saddle, with great effort, his left arm pressed against his left side. He was spilling out his life's blood, and his strength was ebbing. He tried to gather and turn the Circle B steers, but hadn't strength enough. He saw a rider watching him from a distance, Bart Marlowe. When he went all empty inside and fell from his horse, Marlowe turned away—back toward the Circle B.

IT WAS hours later, for the sun was now overhead, though it seemed to Ed Nolan that he'd been out only a moment or two. Hutch Burton was kneeling beside him, bandaging his wound to make sure that it didn't start bleeding again. The rest of the Circle B crew were there, some looking on and some gathering cattle.

Ed said thinly, "You didn't tell Matt!"

"Not a word."

"Tory?"

"No."

Ed heaved a sigh and closed his eyes against the glare of the sun.

Hutch growled, "That lying Marlowe. We met him coming through Squaw Canyon. He gave us a story about you and him fighting the rustlers. He claimed that you got killed and he got driven off. I looked at his six-shooter and saddle gun, and he hadn't fired a shot." He finished bandaging Ed. Then he added, "We won't be bothered with him any longer. I told him not to stop, to just keep on riding—away from Circle B."

Ed opened his eyes, startled. "Hutch, Tory wants to marry him!"

"She does!" Hutch said, feigning surprise. "Why, I'll have to give her a talking to—no matter what you say."

Ed couldn't protest. He'd lost consciousness again.

THEY took him home, got the doctor out from San Marco, and for a week Ed had to spend most of his time in his bunk. The Old Man visited him a couple of times each day, and Tory, strangely subdued, came at least once a day to ask how he was feeling. It wasn't until the day Ed got into his clothes and went out into the sun that Tory really talked to him. Ed was sitting on the bench in front of the bunkhouse, and Tory stood before him with her hands tightly clasped before her. She was wearing a dress now, there was no prettier girl anywhere.

"I was a silly fool, Ed," she said huskily. "Hutch and Dad have made me see that. I guess it was because he—" she meant Bart Marlowe, of course— "was the only man who ever let me know that he loved me."

"He's no good, Tory," Ed said. "But maybe he meant that."

"If I'd known that you—"

"Me?"

"That you cared about me," Tory said, eyes downcast.

"Who told you that?" Ed demanded.

"Dad. And Hutch too."

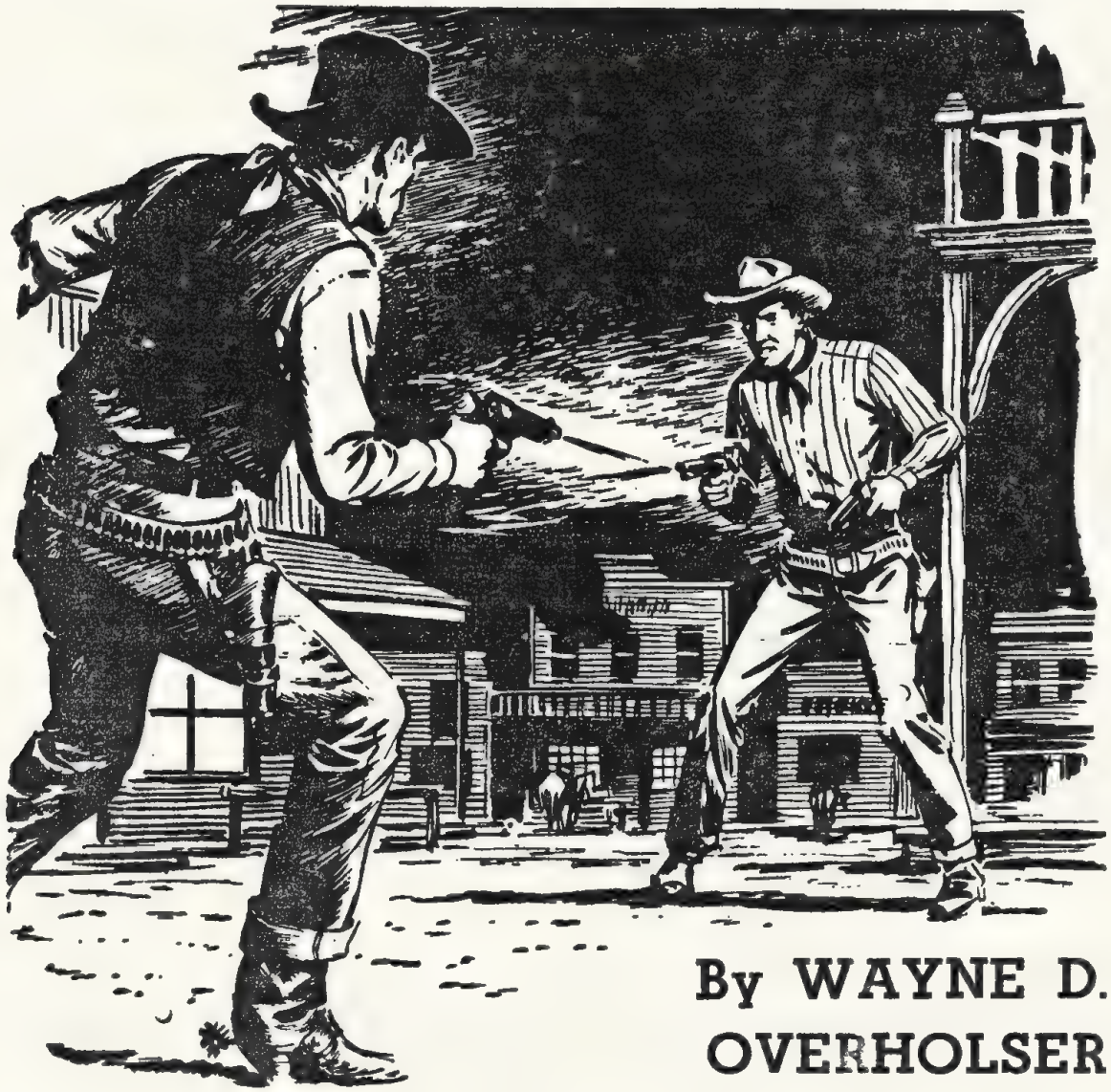
"Shucks, Tory. I'm just Ed Nolan. Remember? Just a hired hand."

Tory looked up, and said almost grimly, "Ever since I learned that a girl could care like that about a man, it was you, Ed. But when I saw that you meant to treat me like a sister forever— Well, can I be blamed for thinking that I wanted to marry someone else? You never gave me any sign, at all. Oh, Ed; this is hard for me! If you love me—"

He spared her further humiliation. Ed reached out and drew Tory into his arms.

☆ Outlaw with a Star ☆

Broke, hungry and outlawed, he had nothing to lose but his life



By WAYNE D. OVERHOLSER

IT WAS not decision which made Jim Prince stop at Garber's Crossing and turn into the first livery stable he came to; it was sheer necessity. Horseflesh can stand only so much, and Prince's big roan gelding had reached that point. Dismounting, Prince off-saddled and rubbed the horse down. Then he felt another's presence and glancing up, saw that the stableman had come along the runway and stood glowering at him.

Prince stepped out of the stall, relieved that he did not know the man. He said, "A double feeding of oats. We've come a ways."

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"And fast," the stableman said angrily. "Some of you rannihans act like you think a horse is a machine. That animal—"

"I know," Prince said, and walked past the stableman into the street.

Involuntarily Prince glanced northward at the road that ran through the sage like a gray diminishing ribbon until it was lost to sight. Fred Beach was out there somewhere. He'd be here, sooner or later. It might be an hour. Or ten. When he did get in, his horse would be in worse shape than Prince's roan, for Fred Beach was a lawman who spared neither horse nor man.

It was now near noon. Prince searched his mind for a moment, trying to identify the day. It must be Wednesday. He wasn't sure. There had been too many days of hiding and riding and doubling back to shake Beach off his trail, and it had been as tough as shaking off a mustard plaster that was glued to his backbone. Beach would be along as sure as the sun would set.

Prince stood there for a time, thinking how little the town had changed in the eleven years he had been gone. He wondered if anyone would recognize him. He doubted it, for he bore little resemblance to the boy of twenty who had left, proud, confident, and filled with ambition. A small smile touched his lips as he eyed the deserted street. It was a puckish fate that had dropped him here in Garber's Crossing, yet he had known there was that chance when he had crossed the Colorado-Wyoming line.

The smile fled from Prince's face when he shook out the last tobacco in the sack, sealed his cigarette, and fired it. His last smoke. One silver dollar in his pocket. A stomach that had not known food for twenty-four hours. In the livery a horse that had to be fed and rested. And Fred Beach one jump behind.

WHAT A hell of a joke this was, winding up his string in the town where he had grown up, respected and liked, a boy who figured he had to go somewhere else to make a name for himself. Well, he'd made a name all right, but it was a hell of a lot different from the name he'd hoped to make.

He flipped his cigarette stub into the street dust, eyes turning again to the north. Still no one in sight. He moved along the board walk to Ptomaine Joe's and went in. Dropping onto the first stool, he picked up the worn menu. He decided on sausage. When a man got down to his last dollar, he didn't order steak.

"Jim."

The word was softly spoken, barely audible, but it was a voice he'd recognize if he heard it in Timbuctoo. He looked up. It was Taffy Collier, a little plump now, but the same Taffy Collier he'd kissed good-by, swearing he'd write to her. He'd made a lot of promises that evening, for at twenty there is nothing impossible to a boy in love. Of all the promises, he had kept only one. Through these eleven years he had never loved another woman.

He met her eyes, the eager blue eyes that were not eager now, and he saw that she had been crying. He cuffed back his battered Stetson, ashamed of his dusty worn clothes, ashamed of the stubble on his face, ashamed of himself and his record and the broken promises.

"Hello, Taffy," he said and tried to hide his feelings behind a grin, for there was still some of the old pride in him.

"Oh, Jim, why didn't you let us know you were coming back?"

She reached across the counter to touch him and instantly drew back as if uncertain how he would feel about it.

"Didn't know it myself," he said. "Anyhow, I'm just kind of passing through."

He choked on that. She'd know when Beach got here. They'd all know. Old Doc McKee, if he was still

alive, and Lane Bruce, the banker, and Sam Dana, the sheriff. They'd know he'd been a braggy fool of a kid who should have taken the job Bruce had offered him. They'd know he'd turned out to be another fast-trigger drifter who was wanted in Montana for murder.

"Don't go." This time when she reached across the counter she dropped her hand on his and left it there a moment. "We need you, Jim."

He tried to give her a cocky grin that she would remember, but it didn't come off. "I don't reckon anybody needs me." He paused, and added, "I've just been drifting around, you know. Free as a bird."

She pulled back her hand, her lips tightening, and he hated himself for what he had said. "I've got some nice steaks, I'll get one started." Turning, she fled back into the kitchen.

He considered ruefully the cards fate was dealing him the bottom of the deck. Steak had been all he'd eat when he was a kid. Taffy had been keeping house then for her dad and her kid brother, Bud, and she'd always had steak when she'd asked him in for supper. Now he wouldn't have enough left from his dollar to buy another sack of Durham.

She returned presently and he asked, "How's your dad?"

"He died two years ago," she said. "That's why I'm working here."

"I hadn't heard. I'm sorry." He reached automatically to his shirt pocket for the makings and dropped his hand away at once, remembering he had emptied the sack. "How's Bud?"

She turned quickly toward the glass case at the end of the counter and taking a sack of Durham from it, brought it to him. Prince took a deep breath, wondering how he was going to make that last dollar stretch.

"He's all right now," she said tonelessly, "but he'll be dead in half an hour."

He looked at her sharply. That accounted for her crying. He asked, "What of?"

"Matt Richter's bullet."

He remembered the Richters. Every range seemed to have its family of toughs, and the Richters filled the bill here. Matt was Prince's age. They had gone to school together and they'd fought from the time they'd started in the first grade. Then there was the old man, big and black and ornery as hell, and the younger boys, Phipp and Rory.

"What happened?"

"It's a long story," she said. "I think your steak's ready."

SHE BROUGHT it to him a moment later along with a big helping of fried potatoes and bread and butter and black coffee. While he ate she told him how the Richters had spread out from the little outfit they'd had back in the hills until now their Rafter R was the biggest ranch in the country.

"They've robbed everybody blind, but Sam Dana never could get the deadwood on them. The trouble is everybody's afraid. The Richters are fast with their guns. When somebody's in their way, they work up a fight and kill them."

"It ain't like Sam to stand for it," Prince objected.

"He's old and he's got rheumatism, but I doubt that anyone could do better. The Richters are too smart to get caught stealing. As far as the killings go, it's always a fair fight."

"How'd Bud get into it?"

"After Dad died we sold the store and bought a little ranch up Cedar Creek. Bud always wanted an outfit, but after we bought it, the Richters got hold of the little ranches between our place and theirs. They offered to buy us out, but Bud wouldn't sell. Then the other day he caught a Rafter R hand trying to burn one of our haystacks. Bud shot him. Sam didn't arrest Bud. He said a man had the right to defend his property. Then

Matt sent word for Bud to meet him in town at noon today."

Taffy went back to the kitchen for his pie. When she returned, she said, "I've begged Bud to leave the country." She closed her hands so tightly her knuckles got white. "He knows Matt will kill him. He's—he's got everything to live for. He was planning on marrying the Laughlin girl next week."

Prince ate his pie, eyes on his plate. He knew exactly how it was with Bud. It was a point that men understood but women never did. A man who calls himself a man has his pride and if he loses it, his life is not worth living. There are some things a man can back away from, but this sort of thing was not one.

Finishing, Prince rolled a smoke and fired it, thinking about what pride had done to his life. His father had died before he'd left. He could have taken the job in the bank and invested the money his father had left him, married Taffy and had a family. He'd be important and respected; he'd be a pillar of the church and probably a member of the school board and the town council. It would have been a good life for most men, but Jim Prince had figured it wasn't big enough for him.

He looked at Taffy who was staring out of the window, worry a heavy weight upon her. He saw that she did not wear a wedding ring. He had supposed she'd marry someone else, yet now he knew he should not have expected anything of the kind, not if she loved him the way he loved her.

He could have come back when his money was gone, asked Lane Bruce for a job, and married Taffy. It was this thing called pride which had kept him from it, had kept him drifting, hoping for the miracle which had never come. Now, with one silver dollar in his pocket, it kept him from telling her he loved her.

Prince rose and dropped the dollar on the counter, hoping she'd take it without figuring how much he owed her. He said casually, "Nice to see you again, Taffy."

He started out. She called, "Jim," and ran around the glass tobacco case and got between him and the door. "Jim, don't do what you're thinking. This isn't your trouble."

He gave her a grin that was much like the cocky reckless grin she used to see. He said, "Why, I guess it ain't. I'll just be drifting on."

Her eyes searched his face. He thought: *She's twenty-eight and she hasn't married because of me.* It was a poor thing, this life he'd lived. There was nobody on the face of the earth he owed a thing to but these folks in Garber's Crossing. Doc McKee, who had been with his father through those last weeks and had done everything for him a human could. Lane Bruce, the banker, who had begged him to stay, offering him a better salary than he could expect because, Bruce had said, Garber's Crossing needed young men like Jim Prince. Sheriff Sam Dana, who had taught him everything he knew about a gun. And there was Taffy Collier.

Now Jim Prince weighed all this against what he had actually done, and he was sick. He knew how it was with Fred Beach. He was a hunter who would follow his man to hell and back, for to him the law was the law and it was not his place to interpret it.

There were three choices for Prince. He could steal a horse and keep running. He might face Beach and kill him. He might go back and stand trial, which at best would probably mean a life term in Deer Lodge. Now Prince had another choice. He could die.

"Jim, I said we needed you," Taffy breathed. "It was wrong to say that. I want your promise that you will ride out of town. Now."

He said in a dry brittle tone, "My promise ain't worth much, Taffy. You should know that."

He wanted to kiss her, to take her into his arms and hold her and say

he'd come back, at last, to keep his promises. But he turned quickly and walked out.

THE SUN was noon high. Again Prince looked along the road to the north. Still empty. He moved away from the restaurant so that Taffy could not see him, and checked his gun. Then, sure that it rode loosely in leather, he waited, but not long.

Matt Richter came into town from the south, as big and dark of face as Prince remembered old man Richter had been, head high, clothed with complete confidence in himself and his gun skill.

Richter gave Prince a glance as if surprised that anyone would be on the street at such a time, but there was no recognition in the glance. Richter would be thinking that Prince was just a saddle bum riding through, a stranger who had not heard of the fight and would duck for cover when the bullets started flying.

Richter reined up in front of Casey's Bar and stepped down. He tied and moved around the hitch pole, each motion deliberate, as if he was being watched. He stopped squarely in front of the bat wings and called, "All right—"

"Matt." Prince stepped into the street. "Turn around."

Richter swung to face him, surprise on his dark face as recognition struck him. "Jim Prince. What the hell—"

"I've come back to kill you," Prince said.

A man had come through the door of Casey's Bar. Now he stood motionless, puzzled. Richter hesitated, still shocked by surprise at seeing Prince, then he went for his gun.

Matt Richter was fast enough to take anybody on his home range, but Jim Prince had made his gun earn his living for him most of the time he had been gone. Too, surprise was a factor in his favor. His gun sounded before Ritchter's was leveled, and then again, two fast shots that rolled out almost together. Matt Richter did not fire. He took one step, gun slipping from lax fingers, stirring the dust as it fell. Then he fell face down in the dirt and lay still.

Men boiled out of doors along the street. Prince stood motionless, watching, the smoking gun in his hand. He glimpsed Doc McKee, old and bald and a little stooped, the battered black bag that Prince had seen so many times in his hand. There was Lane Bruce, tall and dignified, and others he knew.

The medico stopped and knelt beside Matt Richter's body. The rest came on across the street, someone shouting, "It's Jim Prince."

Taffy was beside him before the others reached him, saying, "You shouldn't—"

He said, out of the corner of his mouth, "Don't tell Bud I knew.

Lane Bruce was there first, hand extended. "Jim, you sure did a job." Others shook his hand, men his age or older, all genuinely glad to see him, all but one sandy-haired puncher who stood apart from the others, scowling.

"I don't see Sam," Prince said. "I figured he'd be out here arresting me."

A man laughed, a little shakily as relief struck him. "He's laid up in bed, but if he wasn't, he wouldn't arrest you for ridding us of a coyote like Matt Richter."

"Hell no," Bruce said. "We'll give you a reward."

Doc McKee was there then, shaking Prince's hand. "Sure glad to see you, Jim boy. Fancy shooting if I ever seen any. You could cover both bullet holes with a dollar." He motioned to a couple of the men. "Get the carcass off the street."

The sandy-haired puncher said, "He was my meat, Jim. What in hell did you horn in for?"

"Horn in for?" Prince seemed surprised. "Say, you're Bud Collier, ain't you? Kind of growed up since I saw you."

"Don't get proddy, Bud," Bruce said hotly. "You'd be lying there if Jim hadn't bought in."

"What are you talking about?" Prince asked.

"He came in after me," young Collier said doggedly. "If Sis—"

"Hell, I'm sorry if I busted up a private fracas," Prince said, "but Matt and me had an old fracas of our own."

"I remember some of the fights you two had," Lane Bruce said. "We used to board the teacher when you were in school. She tried to keep you from fighting but she finally gave up."

"You've no cause to blame Taffy, Bud," Prince said. "She told me Matt was going to be in town and you two had some trouble, but don't get the notion I butted in to save your hide. I didn't aim to be cheated after coming this far to get him."

FOR A moment Bud Collier stared at Prince, wanting to believe him and wanting to save his pride. He said then, gruffly, "Thanks," and wheeled away. Taffy had fled back into the restaurant.

"Come over and have a drink," Lane Bruce said. "This is a celebration. You wouldn't know, Jim, being gone for so long, but the Richters have been running things hereabouts."

They went into Casey's Bar, a dozen of them. Before Prince went through the batwings, he saw that young Collier had taken his horse from the stable and was quitting town on the run.

"We might as well call a spade a spade," Bruce said after they'd had their drinks. "Old man Richter will go crazy when he hears. He'll be in town with the other two boys looking for you, Jim."

"Yeah," Doc McKee said. "If you're riding on, Jim, you'd better be at it."

Behind the bar Pat Casey mopped up some spilled liquor, his red-veined face grave. "We've heard of you, Jim, making a name for yourself. Watching you pull your gun, I says to myself, 'He deserved that name.' But they'll come for you now, the three of 'em. That's too many. You'd best ride on, though I reckon we're all proud of you and we'd like for you to stay."

Lane Bruce nodded somberly. "That's right, Jim. If you want to stay, there's a job in my bank or in Sam's office, but you'll be smart to ride on."

Prince looked at these men, something swelling up inside him, a warm feeling he had not had for years. They were his friends, the only friends he had, for since he had left Garber's Crossing, he had not tarried in one spot long enough to make friends. But he had made enemies, plenty of them. That was why Fred Beach would be riding in any time now. Then the warm feeling died. These men wouldn't be his friends after they heard.

He wiped a hand across his face, thinking of the wasted years, the mistakes he'd made, the broken promises to Taffy. He thought of the choices he had now. But he couldn't face Fred Beach to kill him. He couldn't steal a horse and keep running. And he wouldn't go to prison. So there was still one way out. He could die.

"I've been a long time coming back," Prince said. "You know how it goes, drifting from one job to another, aiming to come back and never doing it. Well, now that I am here, I feel like I'm home. I'll stay."

He saw relief in their faces, relief that told its own story. Lane Bruce said frankly, "We're glad to hear it, but you know what it means. What do you aim to do?"

Prince, looked toward the street thinking about Fred Beach. Then he thought about the Richters. He wasn't afraid to die. He had seen death too many times. Often it had seemed the only way out just as now it seemed the only way out for him. If his dying did some good, it was that much better.

"First thing is to get a deputy's star. Think Sam will give it to me?"

"He'll be tickled to death," Bruce said.

"Second thing," Prince said. "Send the Richters word. I don't cotton to the notion of putting anything like this off."

There was a moment of silence, no one meeting Prince's eyes. The pride that was in Bud Collier was not in them. Running his bank was more important to Lane Bruce than dying, to Pat Casey tending bar, to Doc McKee caring for the sick. It was the same with all of them. Not cowardice. Just the simple fact that none was skilled in the use of a gun.

"I don't like it," Bruce said finally. "This is our town, Jim, and —"

"It's my town, too," Prince said. "I've known for a long time I should have stayed here." His grin was not cocky now. "But it comes hard, admitting I made a mistake when I was a wet-eared, smart-aleck kid."

Lane Bruce took a long breath. "We all make mistakes, Jim." He motioned to a man at the end of the bar. "Take 'em word, Al."

"Now I'll go find that star if Sam's got one in his office," Prince said.

"I'll go with you," Bruce said.

They walked in silence to the sheriff's office. Once it had been Prince's habit to drop in every few days to visit with Sam Dana. Now he saw there was no change. The fly-specked window and the dust and the yellow reward dodgers on the wall. The rack of guns and the spur-scarred desk and the empty cell in the rear of the building. The years that had passed might have been so many days.

LANE BRUCE searched through the desk until he found a star. As he pinned it on Prince's shirt, he said, "I'll go tell Sam. If you really want the job, Jim, we'll swear you in, and I'll see the county pays you a salary. When Sam's term is up, we'll elect you." He walked to the door and paused there. "I'm wondering, though, if a man who's been around as much as you have will be satisfied in a burg this size."

"I'll stay here till I'm ready for a pine box," Prince said.

Bruce left then, and Prince knew what he was thinking. Jim Prince would be ready for that pine box before the sun was down. He dropped into the swivel chair behind the desk, and ejecting the spent shells in his gun, thumbed new loads into the cylinder and laid the gun on the desk.

Then he rolled a smoke and waited.

An hour passed. Then two, and Fred Beach rode in and tied in front of the sheriff's office. He came in, a squat, dusty man with red-rimmed eyes, and bone-weary from the long chase. He stopped in the doorway, staring at Prince and the cocked gun in his hand.

If it had been a less grim occasion, Prince would have laughed, for he had never seen a man so thoroughly astonished as Fred Beach was.

Prince said, "Come in, Fred. Pull your gun with your left hand and lay it on the desk. Then sit down."

Beach obeyed automatically. He leaned back in the rawhide bottom chair, shoulders sagging, and rubbed his face with both hands. He said, "How'd you pull this off?"

"It's quite a yarn," Prince said, "which I ain't got time to tell. Maybe you didn't know I grew up in this town."

"Yeah, I knew, but I didn't figure on this."

"I don't aim to go back with you," Prince said.

"You gonna sit there and drill me?" Beach demanded.

"No. I was just wondering about a couple of things. I didn't murder Manders. I mean, you didn't get the straight of it. It was a fair fight."

"That ain't for me to judge," Beach said stubbornly.

Prince had known the lawman would see it that way. He said, "I

wouldn't get a fair trial back there, Fred. Not with me too broke to hire a lawyer."

"You'd have had a show if you hadn't run," Beach said.

"I wouldn't have had any show at all." Prince leaned forward. "Fred, I ain't the kind of gunslinger Manders and his outfit claimed. I could have drygulched you a half dozen times."

Puzzled, Beach said, "I know that."

"I was just a drifter, hiring my gun out where and when I could," Prince went on. "The trouble was I got on the weak side up there. Down here folks think I'm something different. Maybe they're right."

Beach made an impatient gesture. "You're going back, mister, unless you want to plug me and keep on running."

Prince rose. "No, I'm tired of running. Besides, I've got a job to do here, so I'll have to keep you out of the way till the job's done." He nodded toward the cell. "I'm locking you up."

Beach began to curse. "Of all the damned—"

"Get in there," Prince said sharply.

For a moment Beach sat motionless, eyeing Prince. He asked, "Did you aim to do this all the time?"

"No. This is the last place in Colorado I aimed to stop, but my horse was finished. I wanted to get to the San Juan. A lot of mining camps down there, and you'd never have found me, but now I've got to play the cards that're in my hand. Get in there."

Beach obeyed, swearing bitterly. "So help me, Prince, I'll see you hang if it's the last thing I do."

"You won't hang a dead man," Prince said as he locked the cell door behind Beach.

ANOTHER hour passed, the sun well over to the west. Beach sat on the cot in the cell, hating Prince with the deep hatred of a smart man who has fallen into an unexpected trap. Prince idled in the sheriff's office, smoking and playing a few hands of solitaire on the desk, or just leaning against the door jamb, watching the road. He was not a nervous man. He had seen others caught in the same trap that held him. In every case, they had gone a little crazy, had desperately clawed for some means of escape. It was not that way with him. Death would bring peace. No more wild hoping and striving, no more failures.

He saw them coming, the old man in the middle, a son on each side. Prince turned back into the office. He said, "I'll unlock that cell if you'll give me your word to stay out of this."

For a moment Beach stared at Prince through the bars, still not understanding. Finally he said, "All right. You've got it."

Prince unlocked the cell door and went quickly into the street. The Richters had dismounted and were tying their horses at the south end of the block. Prince moved into the middle of the street and waited, planning with cool detachment what he would do. The old man had caused the trouble, so he'd take him first. Then Phipp if he was still on his feet. That would be all. He had no illusions about this. No man was fast enough to take all three.

The Richters spread out, the old man still in the middle, Phipp on the left, Rory, the youngest, on the right.

The old man bawled, "We want to be sure of one thing, Prince. Did you beef Matt like we heard?"

"That's right," Prince said.

The Richters moved up the street, hats pulled low against the slanting sunlight. Prince had that small advantage, but it wouldn't be enough. He walked toward them, slowly, watching the old man for the first move. It came, right hand blurring down, with Phipp and Rory reaching at the same time as if they had been given a signal.

Prince got in the first shot, his slug

taking the old man in the chest just as he had hit Matt a few hours before. But Phipp was faster than Prince had expected, and before he could swing his gun to him, Phipp's bullet slammed into Prince's side. He was knocked off his feet, his right side as numb as if it had been struck by a hammer.

Another shot beat into the echoes of the others, the slug kicking up dust inches from Prince's head. He struggled to his knees, gun still in his hand, and squeezed off another shot that took Phipp just above the nose. That left Rory, but time had very quickly run out, time and strength and consciousness.

Prince held himself upright for an instant. The street and the buildings began to turn. There was another shot. Two. Three. Rory was down, but Prince had not fired. He glimpsed Taffy standing in front of the restaurant, a smoking Winchester in her hands.

Now she dropped it and ran toward him, crying, "Don't die, Jim. Don't die. I've waited so long." Then Prince spilled forward, one last thought gripping his mind. He had been wrong about one thing. He didn't want to die now.

There are those who hold that a man has no choice over these things, that when his time comes he dies and if it is not his time he lives, that it is all written in a little book upstairs. It may be so, for Jim Prince did not die from Phipp Richter's bullet. When he fought back through the fog, he was in bed, and Taffy was there beside him, and Lane Bruce and Doc McKee. And there was still Fred Beach.

Beach did not know what sentiment was, but now he looked down at Prince with a strange expression on his wide, sun-reddened face. He said, "I've heard the whole yarn, but you're gonna stand trial for Manders' killing. Only thing is you could have kept going. I reckon it'll make some difference to the jury when I tell 'em what you done for the people down here today."

Lane Bruce said, "Jim, you'll have the best damn lawyer we can find in Montana."

Taffy reached out and took his hand. "I'm going back with you, Jim. There's nothing you can say that will stop me."

Prince looked from one to the other, and he thought that at times pride is a stupid thing, blinding a man and taking him down a road he never really wanted to travel. This was his town, these men were his friends, and Taffy Collier was his woman. He now belonged.

Beach said, "I'm starting back tomorrow, providing you'll give me your word you'll come when you're able to travel."

Prince tried to grin, but it was nothing like the cocky grin Garber's Crossing used to see.

He didn't have much strength for talk, but he managed to say, "You've got my word, Fred."

THE DRIFTER

By Mary Taylor

There is loneliness in a cactus spire,
Dark-drawn on the evening sky,
Or a drifting ball of tumbleweed,
And a coyote's keening cry.

There is loneliness in the dust that trails
Along the edge of day,
And the glint of a campfire on the range
That flickers far away.

It sighs in the hoofbeats, tired and slow,
That echo on and on,
And a melody that your heart still knows,
When the voice you loved is gone.

It shines in the ghost of a dim, old moon,
Where a strip of cloud is torn,
But it's deep inside a drifter's soul
True loneliness is born.

Shane could see that Red Pelky was on the thin edge of making a grab for his gun

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TINHORN HERO

By LESLIE ERNENWEIN

Few could ever know how really brave a man Lew Shane was —for if they did, he would be dead

LEW SHANE came out of Doc Farnum's office and stood on the railed platform above an outside stairway. This was less than an hour since his arrival in Junction; since a score of men had welcomed him home with hero-worshiping regard, and Mayor Fred Maxwell had proclaimed, "Ellsworth's loss is Junction's gain!"

Shane grimaced, recalling the questions they'd asked him about the final showdown which newspapers across the land had referred to as "The Great Gunfight." His friends had examined the puckered scar where a bullet had peeled a strip of hide from his left cheek. They'd asked if it was really true that he'd been struck by five bullets before he killed his three assailants.

Did they think he limped for the fun of limping?

Shane had been tempted to tell them why he didn't want their hero worship; why he felt like a fool for accepting it. There had been nothing heroic about prowling dark alleys with a star in his vest while sweat dripped from his armpits and apprehension rose in his throat until it gagged him. A man who lived in muscle-cocked expectancy day after day didn't feel heroic, or brave, or gallant—none of the things the newspapers said about him. That last night, with three guns against him, he had felt like a thumb-sucking dunce.

Yet, because he knew his admirers wouldn't understand these things, Shane had swallowed his sarcasm. He had even managed to dredge up a grin when young Bob Elmendorf had suggested:

"Sis will be tickled to see you, Lew."

Shane wasn't grining now. His angular, high-boned face was wholly grave as he peered down at Main Street. He made a tall, lean-shanked shape standing there in morning sunlight; a forlorn and lonely shape.

It occurred to him that Junction hadn't changed in the year he'd been away. Main Street's business establishments were the same weather-

warped structures with tilted board awnings above plank sidewalks. There were the same gnawed hitch-racks in front of Maxwell's Mercantile, the Empire Hotel and Flannery's Saloon; the same expanse of rutted, hoof-pocked dust that turned into boggy mud after a rain.

SHANE'S questing eyes focused on a house farther down the street where a sign said:

DRESSMAKING

The house was exactly as it had been a year ago. And Miriam Elmendorf, he supposed, would be the same—a gracious, dark-haired young woman with warm eyes that were neither blue nor brown but a sort of hazel shade in between. Thinking back to the last time he had looked into Miriam's lovely eyes, Shane remembered how confident he'd been. "I'll bring back enough money to build a house fit for a bride," he'd told her.

Even then, in the final moment before he boarded a northbound stage, Miriam had tried to talk him out of going. She'd said it would be better to live in a homestead shack than have him risk his life wearing a city marshal's badge. But the offer of high pay had been too much for him to resist. It had been almost four times more than he'd got for being a deputy sheriff in Junction County.

"I can save a real stake in one year's time," he'd told her. "It will give us the start we need."

And so he had gone to Ellsworth.

"Twelve months," Shane said sighingly. "Twelve tough months."

He had expected it would be more difficult than being a deputy sheriff. More money, more work, was how he figured it.

Ellsworth was a rough-and-tumble trail town with railroad tracks running through Main Street. It was a much bigger town than Junction could ever hope to be. He had heard about the solid slab of magnesia limestone that served as a sidewalk in front of the Grand Central Hotel, had known of the high-stake gambling and the roistering trail drivers. But he hadn't known about Nauchville at the city's east end—that hellhole of brothels, disreputable saloons and gambling joints that had become a modern Gomorrah.

"We want it cleaned up," the citizens' committee had told him.

Shane had understood then why they were willing to pay such high wages.

Well, he had earned his wages. And saved a bigger stake, due to rewards received for outlaws killed or captured, than he'd hoped for. There would be money to buy some cows in addition to building a good house on his homestead in the Hondo Hills. There might even be enough left over to construct a drift fence that would keep Red Pelky's cattle off his land.

Recalling past trouble with that bullying rancher, Shane thought cynically, He'll not welcome me back.

Shane went down the stairs and walked toward the sign that said:

DRESSMAKING

When he lallygagged along like this, real slow, the limp was scarcely noticeable. The Ellsworth medico had made certain predictions against which Shane had hoisted a protective shield of unbelief. But Doc Farnum had reduced the shield to a tattered strand of stubborn hope.

Shane didn't notice Red Pelky, squatting on his heels in the blacksmith doorway, until the rancher exclaimed;

"Well, if it ain't the big hero of Ellsworth, come home to roost!"

Shane nodded a wordless greeting. There was a derisive tone to Red's voice. His milk-blue eyes were calculating and inquisitive as he asked, "Did you get rich on that big money job?"

"No, not rich," Shane said, and waved to Joe Eggleston who stood at his forge.

The blacksmith had been one of the men who'd welcomed him back. Now Joe suggested, "Don't pay Rod no heed. He's just jealous, is all."

Pelky didn't like that and showed it by demanding, "Who'd be jealous of a tinhorn hero?"

Resentment had its quick way with Shane. A hushed fury was in his voice when he asked, "What do you mean by that?"

"Well, you quit when the going got rough, didn't you?"

Shane couldn't understand it. Why was Red Pelky prodding him so soon, and so deliberately? Aware of two men who stood listening to this on the barber shop stoop, Shane thought, They're expecting me to jump him.

PELKY had got to his feet. He said tauntingly, "I don't hear you denying it." Shane shook his head. This didn't make sense. "Had all the fighting I wanted," he explained, forcing a calm and patient tone. "Enough to last me a lifetime."

Red laughed at him. "That's why I called you a tinhorn hero," he announced, plainly pleased that he had an audience. And now, as if observing this for the first time, he blurted, "Why you ain't packing a gun!" He spat, as if disgusted and said, "Never thought a big city marshal wouldn't have a gun strapped on."

He sauntered off toward Flannery's Saloon in the strutting fashion of a man well pleased with himself.

Shane knew that what had happened was only bald-faced bravado on Pelky's part. But there was no way to prove it without calling the red-headed rancher's bluff.

Presently, as Shane passed the stage line barn, Bob Elmendorf came out and asked, "You been to see Sis yet, Lew?"

"Going to call on her now," Shane said. Remembering that Bob, who worked as hostler, had his heart set on becoming a stage-coach driver, he asked, "When they going to give you a run?"

"Next month," Bob said, a grin brightening his freckled, boyish face. "I'll be eighteen then—and old enough."

"That's fine," Shane said. "Driving stage pays good wages."

As he turned to go, Bob asked, "How come you don't wear your gun, Lew?"

Shane shrugged. "A man shouldn't need a gun in his home town."

"Well, not you," Bob said, frank admiration in his eyes. "Not after all the big fights you won at Ellsworth. I don't reckon there's a man in this whole country that could stand against you with a gun."

The words, and the hero-worshiping way in which they were spoken, embarrassed Lew Shane. He shook his head.

He said soberly, "It doesn't work out like that, Bob. No matter how big a rep a man makes there's always somebody wanting to try his luck, wanting to make a name for himself."

And, going on, Shane thought, That's why Red Pelky tried to pick a fight with me!

There was an increasing heat in the sunlight now. It made a warmth against Shane's shoulders. But it didn't alter the coldness inside him.

This reunion with Miriam would be different than he'd visualized it; hugely different. Instead of hurrying to see her he was walking slowly, yet even so he couldn't help limping. And he couldn't help thinking. A man might be able to hide certain flaws from other men, but he couldn't hide them from himself, nor foist them on the girl he'd wanted to marry.

As Shane opened the gate he thought, She mustn't feel sorry for me.

That was the most important part of this deal. He could stand the rest

of it. But not pity.

Miriam evidently heard the gate creak open, for instantly she was in the doorway, exclaiming:

"Lew! You've finally got here!"

Shane had imagined this meeting a hundred times—Miriam hurrying to him with warm, glowing eyes and smiling lips. But he resisted the urgent impulse to take her in his arms as he said gustily:

"You're even prettier than I remembered."

Plainly surprised at his restraint, Miriam asked, "Aren't you going to kiss me, Lew?"

Shane grinned at her. "Out here, in broad daylight?"

That seemed to baffle her the more. She peered at him as if suspecting some sort of joke. She said, "You never used to fret about being seen." Then, as he followed her up to the veranda, she said gently, "You're limping."

Shane nodded, and took the chair she offered him. "I had Doc Farnum look me over. He sems to think it's a permanent thing, but I'm not so sure."

MIRIAM thought about that for a moment. Gravity brought a change to her oval face but it didn't diminish the womanly warmth in her eyes.

"You're lucky to be alive," she said. "It must've been awful, those three men all shooting at you!"

"Well, it wasn't exactly nice," Shane admitted. A cynical smile quirked his lips as he added, "To hear folks talk you'd think it was something wonderful. Something glorious, in which a man should take pride."

"Men may think that way, but not women," Miriam said soberly. "You should hear Bob brag about you. That piece in the newspaper made such an impression on him! He thinks you're the greatest man who ever lived, Lew. More important than Washington, Lincoln, or Robert E. Lee. Bob took up target practice after he read that piece, said he might decide to get a job as deputy sheriff instead of being a stage driver."

"Just a foolish notion he'll get over," Shane suggested.

But Miriam said, "I don't know. Bob is proud, like you."

"Like me?"

She nodded.

"But I'm not proud," Shane insisted.

Miriam looked at him for a long moment before asking, "Aren't you?"

After he had left her and was back in his hotel room, sprawled across the bed, Shane wondered about that question. Why should Miriam think he was proud of having been a city marshal? He had neither talked nor acted in a way that would make her think so. Chouldn't she understand that all this hero stuff embarrassed him, that he wanted to forget Ellsworth and everything connected with it?

Yet she had accused him of being proud.

There was another thing he didn't understand. Miriam hadn't mentioned the homestead, or the house he intended to build—not a word about the plans they'd made a year ago. He had intended to tell her that things would have to be postponed for awhile, but it hadn't been necessary. And that seemed odd.

Was it the limp?

Was Miriam satisfied to let a crippled man limp along by himself?

That didn't seem possible. Not the Miriam he'd known, the girl who'd been willing to share his homestead shack a year ago. But you couldn't tell about women. They might seem soft and sentimental at times, but they had practical sides also.

The knock on his door startled Shane. Acting on pure impulse he reached toward the head of his bed. Then he realized that this wasn't Ellsworth, and that a holstered gun wasn't hanging there. It was in his valise, along with the silver star he'd had to buy.

"Come in," he called.

Bob Elmendorf stepped inside and closed the door. He looked at Shane, not smiling or speaking for a moment. Then he said solemnly, "Red Pelky says he bluffed you down."

"So?"

"He says he called you a tinhorn hero."

Shane shook out his Durham sack and gave his attention to shaping a cigarette. But Bob's questioning eyes were a steady pressure upon him.

He said, "I told Pelky I'd had enough gun fighting to last me a lifetime. That's the truth, Bob. It's no good."

"But why would you let him call you a tinhorn?" Bob insisted.

Shane thumbed a match to flame. He said, "Because I don't want to fight him, Bob. I've had enough."

"But you can't let him go around town telling folks that last fight turned you gun shy." And when Shane didn't speak, Bob said hotly, "I called him a darn liar to his face! I—well, I told him to get out of town or there'd be trouble."

Shane frowned, guessing the rest, and dreading it. "What did Red say?"

"He laughed at me. He said you wouldn't fight him, and that I dassn't."

SHANE took a deep drag on the cigarette and exhaled slowly. This was a complication he hadn't reckoned on. All the angles of his problem had been solved, he'd thought, all the dismal evasions and omissions.

"Red Pelky has always been too big for his britches," Bob said. "It's time he was whittled down to his proper size."

By a big hero, Shane thought angrily. This was what a gun rep did for a man. Made him a target. Hero worship, then bullets. The pattern never changed.

Patiently, as if explaining an old and humorless joke, Shane said, "I've had enough, Bob. More'n aplenty."

"You mean you won't fight him?"

"Reckon not."

Bob stared at him, his eyes wide with bafflement. For a moment he seemd shocked beyond the power of speech or movement. Then he turned abruptly and went out of the room, not closing the door behind him.

Shane listened to Bob's hasty footsteps on the stairs. When that sound faded he looked at the fingers holding his cigarette and, observing how they trembled, cursed morosely. . . .

When Shane heard the rhythmic bong of hoofs on the Big Arroyo bridge, he thought, The noon stage. And he was mildly surprised that he should have retained the memory of this town's routine so long.

Listening to the diminished rumble as the teams slowed down, he could visualize young Bob out there waiting to unhook the wheeler's trace chains. Forty-five minutes from now fresh horses would haul the stage westward and Bob would go home for the noon meal Miriam had prepared for him.

Shane smiled, recalilng how many times he had made a third member at the kitchen table. Miriam was an excellent cook. She could bake an apple pie that made a man's mouth water just to look at it.

When Shane heard the stage depart he considered going down to the dining room, but he dreaded the effort of negotiating the stairs. Besides, he had no appetitite for hotel fare. He'd got his fill of that in Ellsworth.

He must have dozed off then, for he had no awareness of Fred Maxwell's presence in the room until the mayor spoke to him. Shane sat up abruptly, peering at this rotund little man and asking, "What did you say, Fred?"

"Bob Elmendorf has gone to get his pistol," Maxwell announced, panting from his hurried trip up the stairs. "There's going to be a shootout betwixt him and Red Pelky, unless you stop it!"

Shane shook his head in unbelief. "Bob wouldn't do such a loco thing."

But in this same instant he remembered how baffled and upset the youngster had been this morning; how outraged.

"He will, unless you beat him to it," Maxwell insisted. "That's why I rushed up here, Lew. So you could put Pelky in his place." Breathing easier now, the mayor smiled and said, "A simple chore for a man who's been city marshal of Ellsworth."

Some sardonic thought altered Shane's face as he considered this fat little man who'd never fired a gun. He said, "Your deputy sheriff should handle this. There's a law against setting off firearms in town."

"He's attending trial court at the county seat," Maxwell said. "Won't be back for three, four days at least." He stepped over to the window and peered out. "Red is waiting in front of Flannery's. I don't see Bob, yet. Perhaps his sister is trying to talk him out of it."

"Maybe she will," Shane suggested, but he doubted it.

So did Maxwell, for he said, "You'd better strap on your gun and go down front, just in case." Then in a voice high-pitched with excitement, Maxwell announced, "Bob is coming out of the house now!"

Shane turned at once to his valise. He took out his gun-gear and strapped it on. Then, observing the silver star, he asked, "Will you appoint me city marshal for an hour?"

"Sure," Maxwell said eagerly. "Sure I will, Lew!"

AFTERNOON'S slanting sunlight gave the dust of Main Street a metallic shine as Lew Shane came off the hotel veranda. Heat radiated from the plank walk, sucked moisture from the palms of Shane's perspiring hands, yet he felt cold. Men stood on the veranda behind him, on the barber shop stoop and in the stage barn doorway, yet he felt alone.

Shane glanced once at Bob Elmendorf who made a sun-burnished shape farther down the street, then gave his strict attention to Pelky. Red stood in front of Flannery's, one shoulder tilted against an awning post. Facing eastward, toward Bob, the redhead wasn't aware of Shane's presence on the street until Joe Eggleston called eagerly:

"Make him eat his words, Lew!"

Pelky turned, blinking against the sunlight. Shane saw his right hand dip instinctively toward holster, and understood that Red might not take time to notice the star on his vest. Yet, because this was a rôle rehearsed on countless occasions in Ellsworth, Shane continued his methodical, limping march toward Pelky.

"Why you wearing that law badge?" Red demanded, seeing the star then.

Observing his baffled expression, Shane thought, He's off balance, and took hope in that knowledge. Red had primed himself for a fight and had figured out the angles. But this wasn't the fight he'd planned for, and the angles were different. Instead of having the sunlight behind him, it was in his face.

Red's glance shifted from Shane's holster to the silver star, and he asked again, "Why you wearing that law badge?"

"I've been appointed city marshal," Shane said.

"City marshal—of Junction?"

Shane nodded, giving Pelky a strict and unwavering appraisal as he came on. If Red didn't draw now there might be a chance—

Pelky moved away from the post. Placing his back against the front wall of the saloon he glanced at Bob Elmendorf coming along the opposite sidewalk. The he peered at Shane and asked sullenly:

"You butting into this?"

"There's a law against setting off firearms in town," Shane said. "I intend to enforce it."

He was within a dozen paces of Pelky now, near enough to observe

the twitching of a muscle in Red's cheek, to see the bright shining of his sun-squinted eyes. Caught between conflicting emotions, Red teetered on the thin edge of grabbing his gun. He was like a tight-strung wire vibrating to each gust of a shifting wind.

But Lew Shane revealed no knowledge of this as he said, "You've been talking when you should've been listening, Red."

Pelky peered at him in the gawk-eyed way of a man, not sure, yet wanting to be sure. "I thought you'd had enough fighting for a lifetime," he muttered.

"Sure," Shane said, solemn now. "I got sick of seeing men die."

Close enough now to reach out and touch Pelky, he halted.

Somewhere on Fremont Avenue a pump handle set up a methodical creaking, and presently a woman called, "Albert—come to supper!"

Doc Farnum came down his outside stairway. He joined the group in front of Krell's barber shop, seeming to be hugely astonished by what he saw.

For a lingering interval there was no sound on the street. Then Shane suggested, "Maybe you said some things you didn't mean, Red."

Perspiration made a greasy shine on Pelky's tight cheeks. He looked at the splayed fingers of Shane's right hand hovering close to holster.

"Is that right, Red?"

Pelky's eyes shifted to flick a questing glance at the expectant faces of men who were watching from roundabout stoops and doorways. He gave Shane another probing appraisal. Then the tightness went out of his eyes and out of his face and out of his body. Meekly, in the sheepish way of a man admitting a trivial prank, he said:

"That's right, Lew. It was just talk."

Turning away he walked to his horse at the hitchrack, climbed into saddle and rode off without a backward glance.

BOB ELMENDORF hurried toward Shane, a holstered gun thumping his hip in odd contrast to the boyish smile on his face. "You whittled Red down to proper size!"

But it was Miriam, waiting quietly across the street, who attracted Shane's attention. Ignoring men who were voicing their hero-worshiping regard, he limped over to Miriam, and asked, "Am I late for supper?"

She shook her head and smiled.

Doc Farnum came up then. "Suppose Red had grabbed his gun?"

Shane shrugged.

"But you couldn't have drawn against him—"

"Not so loud," Shane cautioned. "I told you it wasn't going to be known."

Presently, as Shane limped along the street with Miriam, she said, "So your right arm is crippled."

"Well, there's no strength in it. Doc says I may have to wait a long time for the damaged muscles to heal."

Miriam didn't speak again until Shane opened the gate for her, using his left hand. Then she said, "So that's why you didn't kiss me." And grasping the lapels of his vest, she demanded, "Why keep it a secret?"

"Might be a risky thing to let such news get around," he explained.

"That's not why you didn't tell me."

Shane shrugged.

"I though it was the limp," Miriam reflected. "That's why I said you were proud. And you are, Lew—so proud you'd risk your life for a scatterheels boy, and refuse to kiss his sister. Perhaps Red Pelky was right when he called you a tinhorn hero!"

"But I may be crippled for life," Shane said. "You wouldn't want—"

"Oh, yes, I would," she interrupted.

Impatient with him, Miriam took hold of his shoulders and used her strength to bring his head down.

He asked, "Will you share the shack with me until a house can be built?"

She nodded, and the frank pressure of her lips told Lew Shane how glorious the sharing would be.

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By

RAY GAULDEN

BOOM TOWN Trouble-Shooter

Cassidy was the kind who attracted women and bullets

■ Darkness had thrown its somber covering over the high country when Blain Cassidy left the Big Star mine and walked down the mountainside to the town of Gold Hill. The black soil of the street was deeply rutted from the heavy ore wagons that moved along its length both night and day. There was no plank sidewalk yet, for the camp was new and raw, the buildings hastily thrown together and without paint.

Miners—bearded, rough-featured men who had put in their shift—were on the street now, moving from one bar to another. Some of them recognized Blain Cassidy and spoke to him. "Hi, Cassidy. Come on and I'll buy you a drink."

"See you later," Cassidy said and went on toward the lights of the Pay Dirt Café, moving with an effortless stride. He was a big man, broad-shouldered and square-jawed, with a reckless shine in his gray eyes.

He turned in at the café. The place was empty except for the owner, Sue Wendall, who was busy cleaning out the coffee urn. The girl looked over her shoulder, started to smile. But then she recognized him and the smile left her face in a hurry. A little frown of displeasure began to grow on her smooth brow. She said, "I'm sorry, but I was just closing up."

She was a slender, straight-limbed girl with hazel eyes and luxuriant brown hair. The sleeves of her blue dress were rolled up to her elbows, revealing nicely rounded arms.

Cassidy grinned at her. "Now that you're all through work, we can go out and take in the town."

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Cassidy. I have other plans."

He sat down, wrapped his legs around a stool and stared at her steadily. "Why don't you quit giving me the cold shoulder?"

She met his gaze unflinchingly. "What's the matter, does it bother you to have one woman in the camp who doesn't faint with joy when you happen to look in her direction?"

Cassidy made a wry face. "You've just been listening to a lot of loose talk. I'm the home-loving type, really. Gentle as a kitten."

"You can't sell me that line, mister. I know all about you. You're the trouble-shooter for the Big Star mine and tough as a boot. They say you'd rather fight than eat. Got quite a reputation as a lady killer, too, especially among the honkytonk girls."

Color had climbed to Sue Wendall's cheeks and her voice had an edge to it. "Why don't you go on down to the Red Front? I hear there's a new girl down there that's really a knockout."

The grin hadn't slipped from Cassidy's lips. "As a matter of fact," he said. "That's where I was heading, but you wouldn't have much trouble changing my mind."

Sue smiled coldly. "Really, Mr. Cassidy. You've been trying for a month now Don't you think it's time you were giving up?"

"Nobody ever called me a quitter." Cassidy stood up suddenly, leaned across the counter and pulled her toward him. The girl struggled, but she was helpless in his big hands. She could have yelled, but the sound would have been muffled for his lips were on hers, pressing hard.

When he finally let her go, her eyes were shooting sparks and her right hand whipped up, slapping him across the face.

Cassidy laughed and touched his cheek gingerly. "I'm still not giving up," he said and headed for the door.

Sue scrubbed at her mouth with the back of her hand. "Don't you dare come back here," she flung after him.

The Red Front Saloon wasn't that color. In fact, it hadn't been painted at all. But there was whisky and a piano and girls inside, and Cassidy knew that was all that mattered to the miners.

He went in and shouldered his way through the noisy crowd of red-shirted men in heavy, flat-heeled boots. For the most part they worked for the Big Star and they knew Cassidy. Some of them spoke to him, slapped him on the back and offered to buy him a drink when he stepped up to the bar.

A few of them had felt the hardness of his fists and some of them had looked down the barrel of his gun when they got out of line, but they were men who did not hold a grudge. As trouble-shooter, Cassidy had a tough job, but they admired him and respected his judgment.

WITH A whisky glass in his hand, Cassidy turned and put his back to the bar, aware of the silence that had fallen over the room. Every eye in the place was turned toward a platform built against the far wall. Following their gaze, Cassidy saw the reason.

A piano had been placed on the platform. Leaning against one end of it was a girl. He forgot about his drink

as he stared at her. She was, he could tell, the kind of woman who would make a man forget anything. Red hair hung like a flame about her delicately molded face, and a pair of sultry green eyes, with long, curling lashes looked out at the crowd and seemed to touch every man in that packed room.

At the piano sat a bundle of bones that Cassidy guessed had once been a man, but the fellow knew how to play, a soft, stirring melody that held Cassidy motionless.

He set his glass down on the bar without taking his eyes off the girl. Her voice was low and throaty, and it seemed to weave a spell over those rough, whisky-guzzling boys who dug for the yellow stuff. As though they had been frozen, they stood and stared at her with rapt expressions on their faces. And when the song was ended, they almost brought the house down. But all that wild applause did not bring her back.

Cassidy's eyes followed her as she stepped down from the platform and moved toward a door at the back of the room. She was new here, as was the piano player and some of the housemen. Cassidy turned back to the bar and then he saw the sign above the mirror: UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT.

When he had finished his drink, Cassidy strolled about the room, idly watching some of the players at the games of chance, the-hop-and-toss, the chuck-a-luck and the wheel of fortune. At one of the dice tables, a miner who worked for Big Star was scowling as Cassidy came up.

"What the hell you gents trying to pull?" the miner snarled. "These dice are loaded."

Two burly housemen appeared out of nowhere. A blackjack flashed in the lamplight and the miner fell without knowing what had hit him. Quickly, he was dragged through the batwings and thrown into the street.

So that's the way it is, Cassidy thought. When the housemen came back inside, Cassidy was waiting for them. His big right fist sledged one of them on the side of the head, staggering him, and before the other man knew what was happening. Cassidy's knee lifted and drove into his middle. The fellow bent over, groaning.

Before he could recover, Cassidy grabbed his head and slammed it against his companion's. They were both down in the sawdust then, and Cassidy stood over them, waiting to see if they were going to get up.

"All right, tough boy. You've had your fun."

The sound of the voice brought Cassidy whirling around with his hand on the butt of his gun, but he didn't draw the weapon because he knew he would die real sudden if he did.

The man who had spoken didn't look very big. At a glance you might have taken him for a fuzz-faced kid who was trying to act tough. But he wasn't any kid and he wasn't playing a game. Cassidy knew that as soon as he looked into the fellow's eyes. They were a pale pink and down in their depths was something cold and cruel that made you shiver a little.

Cassidy's hand fell away from the butt of his gun and he asked, "You the new boss here?"

"No, but the boss wants to see you."

"Well, trot him out," Cassidy said roughly.

The man with the pink eyes waved his gun toward the rear of the building. "Back there, mister, and don't try to get those big hands of yours on me, because I'd just as soon put a bullet in your belly as not." For all the expression there was on his thin face, he might have been discussing the weather.

Cassidy said quietly, "I don't think I'm going to like you, bud. In fact, I'll probably have to kill you before the week is over."

"I'll be around for a long time, mister. But right now, cut the gab and get moving."

Cassidy wasn't used to being shoved around, but he didn't know anything he could do about it right then. With the gunman close on his heels, he walked to the back of the room and stopped in front of a door marked private.

"Open it and go on in, mister."

HE TWISTED the knob and stepped into the office. He stared across the room at a girl sitting at a at a flat-topped desk—the girl with the flame-colored hair who had sung a little while ago. She was going over a big ledger now, but she glanced up. When she saw him, a warm smile caught at her red lips.

"Have a chair and let's get acquainted, Mr. Cassidy. I'm Myrna Malone, the new owner."

There was faint puzzlement in Cassidy's eyes. "How is it that you know me?"

"I make it a point to know all the important people in a town where I intend to live, Mr. Cassidy." Her green eyes were appraising him boldly.

A thin smile pulled at Cassidy's lips. "I reckon the former owner told you to watch out for me and tonight somebody pointed me out to you."

"You're partly right," she said and her eyes didn't leave his face. "I was told you take pretty good care of your miners, always seeing that they get a square deal. But as for having you pointed out to me, that wasn't necessary. While I was singing, I looked for a man who would fit the name of Blain Cassidy. There was only one."

A little ripple of excitement went through Cassidy. Then he remembered the man behind him. "This yahoo gives me the creeps," he said. "Can't you get rid of him?"

The girl kept smiling and she spoke to the gunman without looking at him. "It's all right, Pinky. Leave us alone."

Cassidy had an idea that Pinky didn't like that, but the gunman turned and left the room without a word. When the door had closed behind him, Cassidy gave Myrna Malone a level stare. "You've got some pretty tough boys working for you."

"Not tough enough, evidently, judging from the way you handled those two a while ago."

Cassidy's face tightened. "Big Star wants it miners treated right. We don't like loaded dice and crooked wheels."

"It's nice to know where we stand," she said, the smile still on her lips. "But I didn't come up here to run a Sunday School. This place set me back plenty and I intend to show a profit."

"Sure, but you don't have to make it all in one night."

Myrna Malone's eyes turned moody. "Nobody knows how long this boom will last, Cassidy. I've seen other camps like this one—swarming with people one day and the next the ghosts take over. Once I got caught like that and lost every dime I had. Cost more to get the equipment and fixtures shipped out than they were worth."

She caught herself then and the dark mood slipped away. Rising, she came slowly around the desk, the lamplight reflecting on her soft, white skin. The front of her dress was cut very low and Cassidy had a hard time keeping his eyes on her face.

"I never played for big stakes," Cassidy said. "Me, I'd rather go on working for wages, do what the boss tells me and pick up my check every Saturday night. That way you haven't got a thing to worry about."

She was coming toward him and she said, "There's no future in that, Cassidy."

"It's good enough for me."

THE GIRL was close to him now. She reached out and began to twist one of the buttons on his shirt. Cassidy felt the hot blood pounding in his throat as he looked down at her, vibrant and alluring, with those green eyes upon his face.

Her full, well-shaped lips were parted just a little, and when he

reached for her, she came willingly, pressing her pliant body against him while her arms went around his neck. Cassidy lowered his head and put his lips on hers, kissing her roughly. And for a moment everything was forgotten except the desire that was sweeping through him.

At last he let her go. When she made no move to step back, he did so himself. They stood there and looked at each other, neither speaking, but their eyes revealed much.

Myrna Malone said softly, "We'll get along all right, Blain Cassidy. You're my kind of man."

He gave her a crooked little smile. "Sure, we'll get along fine, if you run the right kind of place."

"You talk like the law, mister."

"There's no law in Gold Hill," Cassidy said. "But most of the miners work for Big Star and the company wants things to run smooth. I'm being paid to see that they do."

"Come back later, Cassidy, and we'll have a drink. I might even tell you my life story."

"Maybe I'll take you up on that," Cassidy said and headed for the door.

The man called Pinky was standing just outside the door. He didn't look up, but Cassidy could feel his cold eyes boring into his back as he walked over to the bar. He ordered a drink and was sipping it slowly when the bundle of bones came up and called for whisky.

The bartender shook his head. "The boss says no more whisky, Mister Ivories."

The man called Mister Ivories looked sadder than ever. He started to turn away when Cassidy said, "Tough luck. Anybody that can play a piano like you can ought to be entitled to a drink."

Mister Ivories stopped and his tired eyes sized Cassidy up. "People don't usually pay any attention to my playing while Myrna is singing."

"I know good music when I hear it," Cassidy said. "And I'll bet you haven't always played in a dump like this."

"No, I studied for the concert stage once, but that was a long time ago." There were somber shadows in the music man's eyes and he stared off into space. After a moment he looked back at Cassidy and a dim smile touched his lips. "I'm glad you enjoyed my music."

Cassidy smiled. "I'd buy you a drink, but it looks like you're on the Injun list."

"She doles it out to me and I've had my quota for the evening." His eyes dropped to the glass in Cassidy's hand and he sighed heavily. "Guess I'd better get back to work. Pinky Norris is watching me, and I try to get along with Pinky. He's a bad one and it'll pay you to watch out for him."

"I'll keep that in mind," Cassidy said and watched the piano player make his way back to the platform and slump wearily onto the stool.

It was late when Cassidy left the Red Front and turned up the dark street. When he passed the Pay Dirt Café, his eyes turned wistful as he thought of Sue Wendall. He walked on, heading for his cabin on the mountainside. He reached the end of the street and a whisper of sound warned him, caused him to whirl toward the black mouth of an alley, just as a tongue of flame leaped out of the darkness. The roar of the gun was in his ears, and he felt the pain as the bullet struck him, burned hotly along his temple and sent him reeling.

A door slammed somewhere and a little later someone rolled him over. He heard the murmur of voices. "It's Blain Cassidy and he's bleeding like a stuck pig. Better get the Doc."

Better make it the undertaker, Cassidy thought. He didn't have enough strength to fight off the darkness that came rushing toward him.

WHEN HE opened his eyes again it was daylight and he saw that he was in his own cabin. There was a bandage about his head. He reached up and touched it, and then he saw Myrna Malone. She was standing in

the center of the room, looking at him.

"So you finally decided to wake up?" she asked pleasantly.

He lay there and stared at her for a moment. "Don't tell me you've been acting as my nurse?"

Myrna smiled. "No, I haven't been here long. Your little waitress friend sat up with you all night. She looked as if she could use some sleep, so I chased her out."

Thinking of Sue Wendall, Cassidy sighed. "I don't understand you women."

Myrna glanced toward the table. "How about an apple?"

He turned his head and saw the basket filled with grapes and oranges and apples. Looking back at the girl, he said, "I don't get it. Last night you sent somebody to kill me, and now you're acting nice as can be."

"I wouldn't want you killed, Cassidy. I like you."

"I believe you. But you wouldn't let that come between you and your business. You know, you're going to have trouble with me if you don't run things on the level—which I'm sure you don't intend to do."

Myrna put her fingers against his face and they were cool and soft. "Cassidy, we could do all right together. We'd make a team."

"You think so?"

"I know so," she said and leaned a little closer. "I'll cut you in for a share of the profits. I'll show you more money in a month than you make working for Big Star in a whole year."

"Providing?"

"Let me operate as I please. If that dumb bunch of miners don't throw their money away in my place, they'll do it somewhere else. Why should you worry about them?"

"A lot of them have wives and kids to take care of."

The girl made a wry face. "Grow up, Cassidy, and quit being a sucker."

He shook his head. "Thanks for the offer, but I can't see it your way."

Her eyes were searching his face and she made no move to get up. Suddenly she lowered her head and her red mouth came down hard upon his. He felt the fire beginning to burn in him and he half raised his arms to put them around her. But then he caught himself and pushed her gently away.

"That's pretty strong treatment for a sick man," he said.

She got to her feet, a rueful smile on her lips as she looked down at him. "That bullet didn't do much damage, Cassidy. You're a hard man to deal with."

"Thanks for the basket of fruit."

"Good-bye for now, Cassidy," she said. "I'm not giving up."

The girl went out and Cassidy stared after her, trying to figure out what made a woman like that tick. Then he thought of Pinky Norris. It was a safe bet that Pinky was the one who had tried to kill him. Of course the gunman could have been working on his own.

Except for a dull pain back of his eyes, Cassidy felt all right. He got up and cooked his breakfast. After he had eaten, he felt even better. His gun and belt lay on the table and he strapped it on, was fastening the buckle when a knock sounded on the door.

"Come in," Cassidy called.

BILL RIVERS, a mucker on the night shift, came in and shut the door. He said, "Hear you had a little trouble last night, Cassidy. You all right now?"

"I'm fine," Cassidy said. "What's on your mind?"

Rivers looked down at the toes of his heavy boots. "I was wondering if I could borrow a little money till payday?"

"Why, we just got paid yesterday."

"I know, Cass. You see, I was on my way down to buy some supplies and a piece of yard goods that Martha wants so she can make the kid a dress. I been behaving myself, and I didn't think it would hurt to have just one drink."

Cassidy made a sour face. "So you went into the Red Front, got into a

poker game and they cleaned you?"

"That wasn't quite the way it happened, Cass. I was having a beer when some fellow tapped me on the shoulder and told me somebody wanted to see me out back. I never expected anything to happen in broad daylight, but when I stepped out there somebody hit me over the head. And when I woke up, my money was gone. Damn it, Cass. That new owner is going too far!"

Cassidy dug some money out of his pocket and handed it to the miner. "This is the best I can do right now, Bill."

"Thanks a lot, Cass."

When Rivers had gone, Cassidy got his hat and went outside. He could hear the pound of the stamp mills. He glanced toward the mine. He should be up there, but there was a little personal business to be taken care of first. He wanted to have a few words with a man named Pinky Norris.

The morning sun was bright upon his face as he made his way down the slope to the town of Gold Hill, his mouth flat with purpose. He came to the Pay Dirt Café and saw Sue Wendall sweeping the walk in front of the place.

His face smoothed out some when he looked at her. "Thanks for taking care of me last night," he said.

The girl went on with her sweeping. "The doctor said you needed someone to look after you. I would have done as much for anybody."

"Shucks, I thought maybe you were beginning to change your mind about me."

"I still feel the same way."

"Even after me kissing you that way?"

Anger began to shine in her eyes. "I'm warning you, you better not try that again. Maybe your girl friend at the Red Front likes it, but not me!"

Cassidy grinned. "We'll talk about it some more after a while. Right now I've got to see somebody."

"I can guess who," she said bitingly.

Cassidy was about to turn away when he spied a little Mexican boy running up the street toward him. "I have a note for you, Señor Cassidy."

Cassidy read the brief message:

> I don't want to buck you, Cassidy, so I'll run the place right. Come on down and we'll have a drink on it.
>
> Myrna

Cassidy stuck the note in his shirt pocket, wry amusement in his eyes as he headed toward the Red Front. There weren't many customers in the saloon, just three fellows at the bar and Mister Ivories sitting at the piano.

Mister Ivories twisted his head around and looked at Cassidy, his lips moving as though he wanted to say something.

Aware of the silence that held the room, Cassidy walked across the sawdust-sprinkled floor. He glanced toward the men at the bar, but they kept their backs toward him. Mister Ivories continued playing, and the music, Cassidy thought, sounded like a dirge.

A little chill touched Cassidy's spine. Then he saw Myrna Malone standing in her office doorway, that provocative smile on her lips. He went toward her.

THE MUSIC disturbed him and that cold spot between his shoulder blades was spreading. You're quite a girl, Myrna, he thought as he kept moving toward the doorway, wary now. Then the squeak of a board warned him. He was reaching for his gun as his eyes whipped to the balcony on his right.

He saw Pinky Norris up there, crouched behind the railing with a six-shooter in his hand. This morning at the cabin, Myrna had been unable to win him over to her side. So she had written the note to lure him here so the gunman could finish the job he had bungled last night.

It was a nice little trap and Cassidy had walked into it unsuspecting, but Mister Ivories' music had made him

cautious. Now his gun was out and kicking in his hand. Pinky Norris hadn't gotten himself set up there on the balcony, but he would never have another chance.

Cassidy's bullet tore into him and Pinky screamed. His finger, already tight on the trigger, contracted, and the gun roared as he was staggering back from the railing. But he was off balance and the shot went wild.

Cassidy's eyes came back to Myrna Malone and saw that Pinky's bullet had found a target. The girl didn't cry out, but her body stiffened and the color washed out of her face.

There was a sick feeling in Cassidy as he looked at her. Then a voice, shrill with urgency, brought him whirling around. "Watch the bar!"

He had forgotten the three men over there, but he saw that they were coming to life now. And when he looked at their faces, he knew what they were—gunmen, hard-faced gents who had been stationed there in case Pinky Norris needed help.

They stood ready to earn their pay, and they showed it by grabbing for their guns. A bullet smashed into Cassidy's shoulder and drove him back.

But they weren't all firing at him, and a moment later Cassidy saw the reason. Mister Ivories, a gun gripped in his hand, was coming across the room, moving as though in a daze. With his back against a support post, Cassidy got his gun up and started firing, while over by the office door, Myrna Malone sat huddled on the floor, her green eyes filmed with bitterness as she watched them.

Cassidy cut one man's legs from under him and turned his six-shooter on another, while the third gunman was busy concentrating on Mister Ivories. Death screamed and shrieked across the room. A bullet tugged at Cassidy's shirt, and he could feel blood running down his arm from the shoulder wound.

There wasn't much pain though, and he kept pulling the trigger. Another gunman fell, his hands jerking up to his chest as blood began to flow.

The third gunman lay moaning softly. Mister Ivories stood over him, the smoking gun dangling from his skinny hand. Cassidy knew he had been hit.

For a moment Mister Ivories' head turned toward Myrna Malone, and Cassidy thought he caught a flicker of triumph in those washed-out eyes before the piano player dropped.

Reaching him, Cassidy knelt down and gently rolled him over. He said softly, "Thanks for giving me a hand."

MISTER IVORIES looked up at him, a thin smile on his pale lips. "It's been a long time since anybody told me they enjoyed my music. The crooked stuff that's been going on here didn't set well with me. I've seen the same thing other places, but I could never do anything about it."

"You've known her a long time?"

"She was my wife—a long time ago. I had some money then and Myrna wants money more than anything. More—" Mister Ivories was dead.

Cassidy got up, a sick, empty feeling inside him, and walked over to the office doorway. He hunkered down and looked at Myrna Malone.

"Looks like you win, Cassidy."

"You're a strange woman, Myrna."

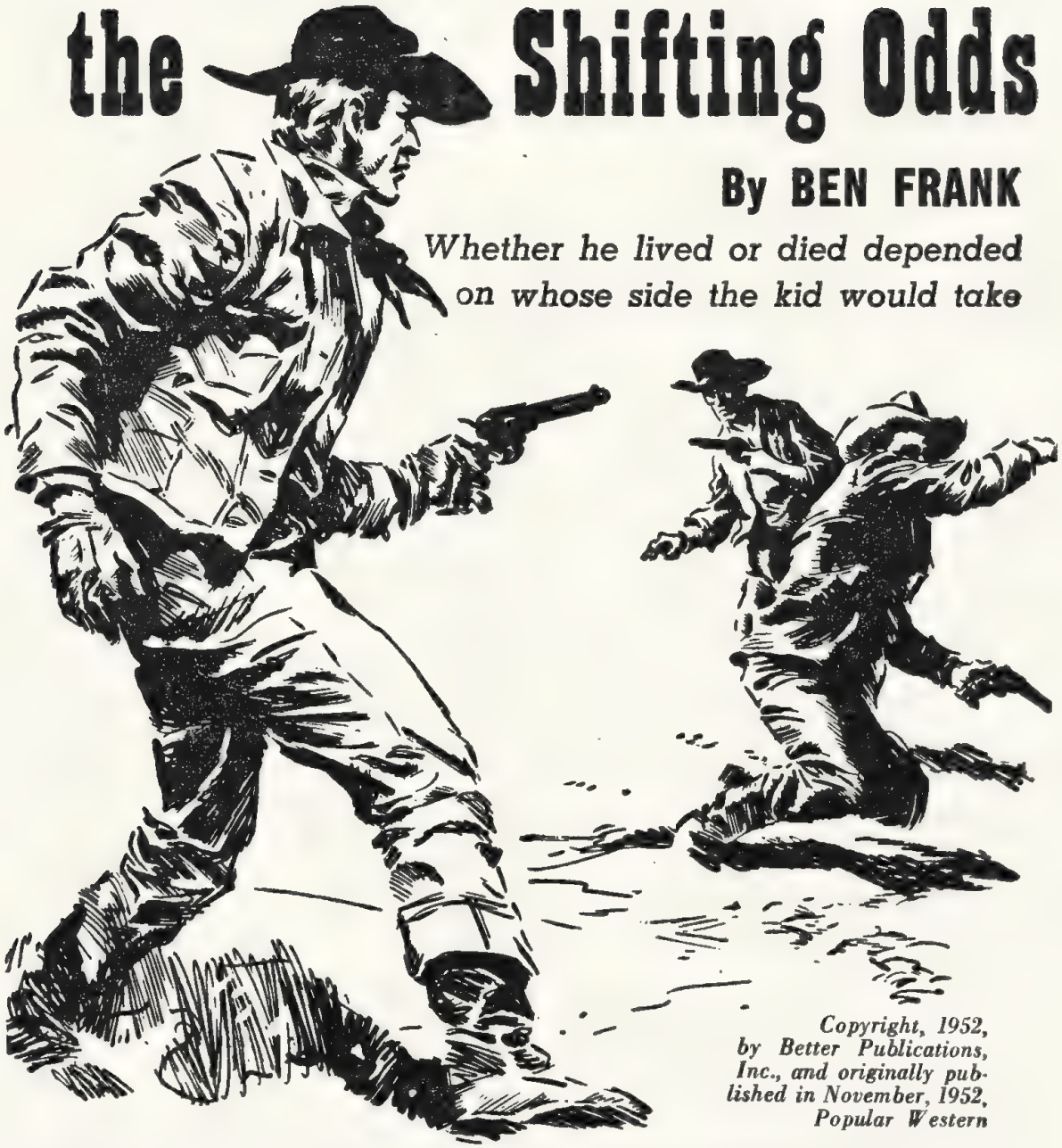
A little shiver went through her and she whispered, "Put your arms around me and hold me for just a minute, Cassidy. I'm getting cold and I want to feel you close to me and try to picture what it might have been like if the worst had been the best."

She was gone then and Cassidy walked out of that room of death, out into the sunlight. The breeze felt good against his face as he turned up the street. The wound in his shoulder wasn't bad, but he wondered if he couldn't pretend that it was and get Sue Wendall to patch him up. He thought about trying to kiss her again. Maybe next time she wouldn't slap his face. He decided to take the chance.

the Shifting Odds

By BEN FRANK

Whether he lived or died depended on whose side the kid would take



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JEFF GOODLAND didn't like the odds one bit. A long, rangy man in his early twenties, he leaned forward in the saddle and stared at the flickering campfire. He could see the four shadowy figures huddled about the smoky flames, and again he thought how the odds were stacked against him and old Hud Peters. Thinking about it, he felt the lump of cold sickish fear in the pit of his stomach grow steadily larger.

If the odds didn't shift like he'd figured they might—well, there were some things a man had to do, even if he were scared half to death. Trying to take sixteen-year-old Danny Leroy back to his mother was one of them.

"I hope this thing works out like you got it figured," Hud growled, breaking a long silence.

Jeff turned to look at him. Hud was an old man who'd spent most of his life in the saddle. He had worked for Jeff's father on the Triangle, and now he worked for Jeff, who had taken over the ranch when his father had died.

In the moonlight, the dried-up old cow-puncher looked something like an over-sized monkey clinging to the saddle on the long-legged buckskin. Hud wasn't afraid, Jeff knew, not for himself, anyway. He simply didn't like the odds any better than Jeff did.

"I hope so, too" Jeff said. "I think I know what makes the kid tick, but I can be wrong. If I am wrong—Hud, you danged old pessimist, you didn't have to come with me."

Hud snorted and cussed. "Sure, I didn't have to come, but you wouldn't have no better sense than to come by yourself. Anyway, I kind of like this Danny Leroy, and not having good sense myself, here I am. Another thing— Say, you crazy trouble-hunting squirt, I ain't sure I like being called whatever you just called me."

Jeff grinned, but in a moment the grin faded, for again he was remembering a small thin woman—Danny's mother. The tears had been streaming down her cheeks, and she'd had to lace her fingers together tightly to keep them from trembling when she'd told how Danny had run away with Chick Denton, Al Sage, and the Mexican.

"He's really a good boy," she said brokenly. "It's just that maybe he's had to work too hard since his pa died. Or he just wants some excitement, some fun. He—he seems to think Chick's some kind of a hero. He—"

She'd cried then, a terrible kind of crying, with her head bowed, and her thin shoulders shaking. A mother crying because she was scared to death for her kid.

"Now, you take it easy, Mrs. Leroy," Jeff said, patting her shoulder awkwardly. "You go on back to the Lazy L and leave it to Hud and me. We'll find Danny and bring him back home before sunup."

She took his word for it. Smiling wanly through her tears, she had climbed back into the rattly old buggy and driven away.

Watching her, Jeff felt a great anger stirring through him at the three outlaws. When he glanced at Hud, he saw the same kind of anger smoldering in the oldster's faded blue eyes.

"You made some big talk to that woman, son," Hud said in a hard, flat voice.

"If I hadn't, you would have," Jeff siad, grinning faintly.

"We ain't got no business tangling with them sidewinders," the old man growled. "It's a job for the sheriff and a half dozen deputies."

"Sure," Jeff agreed, "but by the time we could get hold of the sheriff, that outfit of skunks would be too far away to catch."

Hud had bitten off a big chew of tobacco. He spat at a knot in a fence post and hit it dead center.

"Well, a man don't die but once," he said. "Let's get started."

SO THEY'D saddled up and headed across the rolling, sand-pitted grasslands an hour before sundown. The coming of darkness had offered no problem to the pursuit. The three outlaws and the boy either never guessed that anyone would follow them or didn't give a hoot, for they'd left a wide-open trail across the moon-splashed country.

Now Jeff and Hud were approaching the outlaw camp, and the moon was still high above the jagged mountains to the west.

"Maybe I am a crazy fool to ride into something like this," Jeff said, shifting his sixgun a little forward, "but Danny's all Mrs. Leroy's got left, except the Lazy L, and without Danny, that wouldn't mean a damned thing to her."

Hud faced him, and Jeff saw that the oldster was grinning.

"Now that you've got things straight about being a crazy fool," he said, "let's go over it again. I'm to take care of Chick Denton if they decide they want to fight. You're going to take either Al Sage or the Mexican—whichever needs to be took first."

"Yeah," Jeff grunted.

"That leaves Danny and the one you don't cover. Dang it all, Jeff, I don't—but maybe they won't be any shootin'. Maybe they'll just—"

"Take it easy, Hud!" Jeff cut in tensely. "They've spotted us. Don't forget, I'll do all the talking."

"Yeah," Hud said, "and I hope you say the right words!"

They were close enough now for Jeff to see that the campfire nestled among some flat stones in front of an outcropping of granite. Something steamed in a can. A moment later, he caught a whiff of coffee and remembered that he hadn't eaten since noon. But at the moment, being hungry wasn't important.

To the left of the camp, the shadowy forms of the outlaws' horses stood out against the night sky, uneasy black shadows. The men themselves stood facing Jeff and Hud as they approached. Chick Denton, the leader of the gang, was a distant relative of the Leroys. That day, he had paid an unexpected visit to the Lazy L, demanding food for himself and his men; and the fool kid had ridden away with them.

Denton shifted his feet in the sand and lifted a rifle into the crook of his left arm. Danny, the kid who'd run away from home for a taste of adventure, stood off a little by himself as if he weren't quite sure he belonged in this band of cutthroats. That fact alone made Jeff feel a little less tense.

Dany wasn't a bad kid at heart. He was simply a little wild and reckless, the kind of restless youngster who needed a hero to follow. The trouble was he'd picked the wrong kind of a hero. Jeff knew that Denton was a killer. He was tough talking and tough acting, and the fool kid thought he wanted to follow in the footsteps of this distant relative.

"Take it easy," Jeff called. "It's just Hud and me."

He rode into the smoky red light of the campfire with Hud trailing close behind. He sat there in the light, hands on the saddlehorn, giving the outlaws plenty of time to look him and the old man over. He didn't want any gun play until he'd had a chance to say his piece.

The outlaws relaxed. Al Sage and the Mexican sank down on their heels, and Denton slanted the rifle against a boulder and grinned faintly behind the black stubble on his round, ugly face.

"Howdy," he said.

Jeff slid to the ground and stepped closer to the fire. Hud followed him, limping a little from a bad leg that had been twisted years ago in a fall from a horse.

"Coffee smells good," Jeff said.

Denton shifted forward. "You boys just happen along or come on purpose?"

"On purpose," Jeff told him.

AL SAGE grunted and ran his long fingers over his pointed chin. He was a narrow-shouldered, middle-aged man who had been in and out of trouble most of his life. His pale eyes seemed to twinkle in the firelight, but there was no grin on his thin face.

The third outlaw, a young Mexican, sat unmoved. Glancing at him, Jeff thought that the only thing about him that seemed alive was the glowing cigarette held loosely between his lips.

Jeff turned toward Danny and grinned. The kid's eyes held a frightened, wary expression. He made a poor show of returning Jeff's grin and dropped his eyes. Of course, Jeff thought, the kid must know why he and Hud had come here—and so did the three outlaws—but there was no way of knowing for sure how Danny felt about this business.

"How you making out, Danny?" Jeff asked.

The kid didn't answer. He lifted his shoulders, and his chin came out. Jeff didn't miss that chin. It told him that the kid thought he knew what he wanted. He wanted excitement and

thought he'd get it by following a man like Denton, who wasn't afraid of the devil himself.

"Take a load off your feet, boys, and have some coffee," Denton invited, squatting against the boulder.

Jeff shook his head. He stood with his legs spread a little; his eyes fixed on the boy's face.

"Danny," he said quietly, "your mother's feeling pretty bad about this. She drove clear over to the Triangle this afternoon and told us you'd decided to throw in with these men. She cried about it. She thought maybe Hud and me could talk you into coming back home before you got into some serious trouble."

Danny shifted uneasily. He was armed with a sixgun in a worn holster. The outfit had likely belonged to his father. He was a nice looking kid with wide shoulders and brown hair. His eyes usually held a humorous twinkle, but at the moment, they were narrowed and filled with mistrust.

"All she wants is to keep my nose to the grindstone," he said bitterly. "I—well, I—"

He broke off to stare at the three outlaws. Jeff turned to look at the men, too.

Denton looked angry, and Sage had picked up a handful of sand and was letting it trickle slowly between his thin fingers.

The air had suddenly become charged with danger. Jeff could feel it—it felt thick enough to cut with a knife—and the lump in his stomach grew colder and heavier.

"Why don't you leave the kid alone?" Denton growled. "He's old enough to know what he wants to do."

"I don't think so," Jeff returned evenly. "If he was, he wouldn't be here."

"Yeah?" Denton said.

"It's like this," Jeff went on quietly. "Danny's never been around much, doesn't know the score. To him you seem like quite a hombre. A hero. A man to look up to and imitate. Now, if he was a few years older, a little more experienced, he'd know better. He'd know you for what you are, a cheap, bushwhacking crook. A no-good—"

Denton leaped to his feet, his fists balled.

"You must be looking for trouble," he said. "A damned lot of trouble!"

Jeff grinned at him and said, "Could be."

"You can't talk like that to me! You—" Denton suddenly grinned, a cold, calculating grin, and took a step away from Jeff. "All right, kid," he said to Danny. "Go back to your ma's apron strings if that's what you want to do."

DANNY was scared, scared stiff. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out. Denton laughed explosively.

"Listen, Danny," Jeff said, "you're on the wrong side of the fence. You're outside the law. If you string along with this outfit, you'll never know what it is to be safe or have a moment's peace of mind. More than that, these coyotes don't give a hoot about you. They want you with 'em because you're pretty good at shooting a gun and can be talked into doing some of their dirty work for 'em. If you don't believe it, ask Denton. How about it, Denton, am I—"

"You talk too much," Denton said harshly. "You talk way yonder too much!"

The Mexican still sat unmoved, smoking his cigarette. But Al Sage had got up on his long thin legs. He smiled faintly and shifted his gun belt; and Jeff guessed that if there were a showdown, Sage was the man he'd have to kill.

But suddenly the Mexican tossed his smoke into the fire and shoved up on his knees. His teeth gleamed white in the firelight, and Jeff wasn't so sure of himself. He felt his stomach muscles knot up. So the young Mexican was going to get in on this, too, he

thought, and he knew that he himself was not fast enough with a gun to take care of both men.

Denton's eyes shifted over his two men and he seemed satisfied with what he saw. He spat into the fire and snarled, "Goodland, you and the old man climb back on them horses and get the hell out of here before you get hurt!"

In the distance, a coyote howled at the moon, and one of the horses snorted and swung his head.

Ignoring the three outlaws, Jeff pulled out the makings and rolled a cigarette. Knowing now for sure that there was going to be a fight, he was surprisingly calm. His fingers were steady; he spilled not a grain of tobacco. He let his eyes move from one tense face to another while he licked the quirly into shape.

Hud, he saw, was ready to take Denton. The old man stood sideways in the shadows, his hand on the butt of his sixgun. He, too, was calm in this moment before the payoff. He would shoot from the hip: he would get his man. He was old, but there was still a lot of speed left in his bony wrists and fingers.

Then Sage stepped a little to one side, and the smoke from the campfire suddenly hid the outlaw's hands. Jeff felt scared again, but he didn't let on. He stood there, waiting, grinning faintly, waiting until the psychological moment came to light the fuse.

He waited until he saw a muscle in Denton's jaw bunch, then said. "Get on your horse, Danny, and we'll get started back to the Lazy L. Promised your mother I'd have you back by sunup."

Danny's face had turned chalky white. He'd never been in a situation like this before, with death ready to swoop down. He'd never seen a man killed, but some way he knew now that pretty soon someone was going to be killed. He got to his feet, and all the time his eyes seemed to be searching Jeff's face for any weakness, any sign of fear.

"You're not going any place, kid," Denton said harshly. "Nobody ain't going no place!"

Jeff shot a quick glance at Sage. It was bad, not being able to see the man's hands because of the smoke from the fire. Then he caught a movement of the Mexican's gun hand and knew he'd made a wrong guess. It was the Mexican who was going to open the battle.

IT HAPPENED fast, all of it. Funny thing, Jeff thought later, how much you can see in a gun fight without really looking at anything, except the man you have to outgun.

Hud and Denton went for their guns at almost the same instant, but only one shot was fired. Denton took Hud's slug through the chest, coughed once, and crumpled to the ground with his arms flung forward. His gun fell and bounced into a clump of greasewood.

The young Mexican hadn't unleathered his gun, after all, for Jeff had suddenly covered him. He stood there, his hand frozen an inch from the black butt, his teeth gleaming wickedly. But Jeff couldn't cover Sage, too. He couldn't even see him at the moment, for the smoke had leaped between them again in another sudden upward swirl.

When the smoke screen shifted, Jeff saw that Sage's gun was up. It was up and leveled at the pit of Jeff's stomach.

The wind gave out suddenly, and Jeff could no longer see the gun. Unconsciously he braced himself for the drive of the slug which he knew must come. This was it, he thought. This was the end, the way a man died, gambled his life with the odds against him and—

A gun blast tore into his thinking. He saw Sage's thin body jerk back, saw the man claw at the air to keep his balance, and failing, pitch forward on his face.

Jeff's eyes whipped across the narrow space to where Danny stood. The kid held a smoking gun in his hand. His face was still chalk white, but now his eyes were steady. Then, out of the corner of his eye, Jeff caught a movement.

The young Mexican's gun came up in a blurring arc. In this moment, when Jeff had turned his attention on Danny, the outlaw had taken a last desperate chance. He fired, but it was a hasty shot. His gun came up for a second try, and Jeff squeezed trigger. The Mexican looked surprised. He turned around slowly, fell against a jagged boulder, and lay still.

No one spoke for a long minute. Then Hud holstered his gun and turned on his monkey grin.

"It was a good fight while it lasted," he said.

Jeff grinned feebly and glanced at Danny. He knew how the kid must feel. Just like he felt himself—knees wobbly, a sickish twisting in the pit of his stomach—

"Come on," Hud said gruffly. "Let's load 'em up and head back home."

Hours later, when Jeff, Hud, and Danny rode up to the Leroy ranchhouse, Jeff gave the kid's shoulder a pat and said, "You better go tell your ma you're back home. Hud and I will take care of your horse."

Without a word, the kid slid from the saddle and hurried into the house.

"Not a bad younker at heart," Hud murmured. "Now that Chick Denton's out of the way—well, I don't think he'll give his ma much trouble from now on."

Jeff didn't say anything. Remembering how he'd felt, waiting for Al Sage's bullet, his legs still got weak. Grinning faintly, he began to unsaddle Danny's horse.

"You had him figured right," Hud said.

Yeah, Jeff thought. Yeah, he'd figured the kid right. Funny thing how a kid like Danny will throw in with his hero. That was why he himself had faced Denton as if he weren't afraid of him, making himself a hero in the kid's eyes, even if he was shaking in his boots. It had been the only way to shift the odds.

THE SHADOW WESTWARD

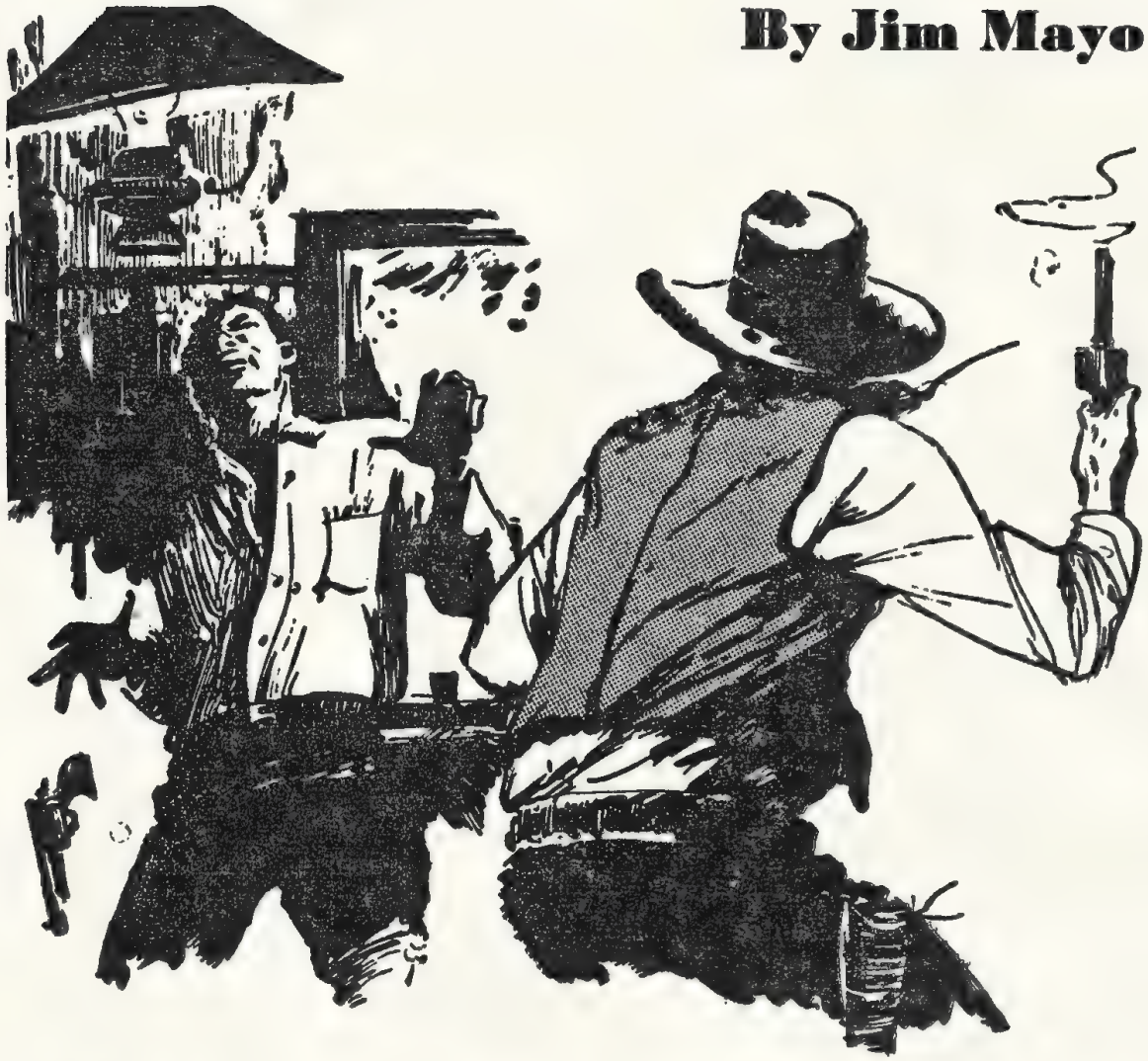
Above the desert, jet planes roar
And flash their monstrous silver beams
Where, scarce a century before,
Men drove slow oxen teams.

Stage coaches, horses, mules are gone;
The mammoth super-highway screams
With foreign cars; the race is on,
Where men drove oxen teams.

Trains rocket west with sleek swift steel:
Mirage of pioneers' lost dreams;
Long faded now the track of wheel
Of vanished oxen teams.

—Frederick Ebright

By Jim Mayo



MISTAKES... Can Kill You

If you make one error in a gunfight, you've made just one too many

MA REDLIN looked up from the stove. "Where's Sam? He still out yonder?"

Johnny rubbed his palms on his chaps. "He ain't coming to supper, Ma. He done rode off."

Pa and Else were watching him and Johnny saw the hard lines of temper around Pa's mouth and eyes. Ma glanced at him apprehensively, but when Pa did not speak, she looked to her cooking. Johnny walked around the table and sat down across from Else.

When Pa reached for the coffee pot he looked over at Johnny. "Was he

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alone, boy? Or did he ride off with that no account Albie Bower?"

It was in Johnny neither to lie nor to carry tales. Reluctantly, he replied. "He was with somebody. I reckon I couldn't be sure who it was."

Redlin snorted and put down his cup. It was a sore point with Joe Redlin that his son and only child should take up with the likes of Albie Bower. Back in Pennsylvania and Ohio the Redlins had been good God-fearing folk, while Bower was no good, and came from a no good outfit. Lately, he had been flashing money around, but he claimed to have won it gambling at Degner's Four Star Saloon.

"Once more I'll tell him," Redlin said harshly. "I'll have no son of mine traipsin' with that Four Star outfit. Pack of thieves, that's what they are."

Ma looked up worriedly. She was a buxom woman with a round apple-cheeked face. Good humor was her normal manner. "Don't you be sayin' that away from home, Joe Redlin. That Loss Degner is a gunslinger, and he'd like nothin' so much as to shoot you after you takin' Else from him."

"I ain't afeerd of him." Redlin's voice was flat. Johnny knew that what he said was true. Joe Redlin was not afraid of Degner but he avoided him, for Redlin was a small rancher, a one time farmer, and not a fighting man. Loss Degner was bad all through and made no secret of it. His Four Star was the hangout for all the tough element and Degner had killed two men since Johnny had been in the country, as well as pistol whipping a half dozen more.

It was not Johnny's place to comment but secretly he knew the older Redlin was right. Once he had even gone so far as to warn Sam, but it only made the older boy angry.

Sam was almost twenty-one, and Johnny but seventeen, but Sam's family had protected him and he had lived always close to the competence of Pa Redlin. Johnny had been doing a man's work since he was thirteen, fighting a man's battles, and making his own way in a hard world.

JOHNNY ALSO knew what only Else seemed to guess, that it was Hazel, Degner's red-haired singer, who drew Sam Redlin to the Four Star. It was rumored that she was Degner's woman, and Johnny had said as much to Sam. The younger Redlin had flown into a rage and whirling on Johnny had drawn back his fist. Something in Johnny's eyes stopped him and although Sam would never have admitted it, he was suddenly afraid.

Like Else, Johnny had been adrift when he came to the R Bar. Half-dead with pneumonia he had come up to the door on his black gelding, and the Redlin's hospitality had given him a bed, the best care the frontier could provide, and when Johnny was well, he went to work to repay them. Then he stayed on for the spring roundup as a forty a month hand.

He volunteered no information and they asked him no questions. He was slightly built and below medium height, but broad shouldered and wiry. His shock of chestnut hair always needed cutting, and his green eyes held a lurking humor. He moved with deceptive slowness, for he was quick at work, and skillful with his hands. Nor did he wait to be told about things, for even before he began riding he had mended the buckboard, cleaned out and shored up the spring, repaired the door hinges and cleaned all the guns.

"We collect from Walters tomorrow," Redlin said suddenly. "Then I'm goin' to make a payment on that Sprague place and put Sam on it. With his own place he'll straighten up and go to work."

Johnny stared at his plate, his appetite gone. He knew what that meant, for it had been in Joe Redlin's mind that Sam should marry Else and settle on that place. Johnny looked up suddenly, and his throat tightened as he looked at her. The gray eyes caught

his, searched them for an instant, then moved away, and Johnny watched the lamplight in her ash blonde hair, turning it to old gold.

He pushed back from the table and excused himself, going out into the moonlit yard. He lived in a room he had built into a corner of the barn. They had objected at first, wanting him to stay at the house, but he could not bear being close to Else, and then he had the lonely man's feeling for seclusion. Actually, it had other advantages, for it kept him near his horse, and he never knew when he might want to ride on.

That black gelding and his new .44 Winchester had been the only incongruous notes in his getup when he arrived at the R Bar, for he had hidden his guns and his best clothes in a cave up the mountain, riding down to the ranch in shabby range clothes with only the .44 Winchester for safety.

He had watched the ranch for several hours despite his illness before venturing down to the door. It paid to be careful, and there were men about who might know him.

Later, when securely in his own room, he had returned to his cache and dug out the guns and brought his outfit down to the ranch. Yet nobody had ever seen him with guns on, nor would they, if he was lucky.

The gelding turned its head and nickered at him, rolling its eyes at him. Johnny walked into the stall and stood there, one hand on the horse's neck. "Little bit longer, boy, then we'll go. You sit tight now."

There was another reason why he should leave now, for he had learned from Sam that Flitch was in town. Flitch had been on the Gila during the fight, and he had been a friend of Card Wells, whom Johnny had killed at Picacho. Moreover, Flitch had been in Cimarron a year before that when Johnny, only fifteen then, had evened the score with the men who killed his father and stole their outfit. Johnny had gunned two of them down and put the third into the hospital.

Johnny was already on the range when Sam Redlin rode away the next morning to make his collection. Pa Redlin rode out with Else and found Johnny branding a yearling. Pa waved and rode on, but Else sat her horse and watched him. "You're a good hand, Johnny," she said when he released the calf. "You should have your own outfit."

"That's what I want most," he admitted. "But I reckon I'll never have it."

"You can if you want it enough. Is it because of what's behind you?"

HE LOOKED up quickly then. "What do you know of me?"

"Nothing, Johnny, but what you've told us. But once, when I started into the barn for eggs, you had your shirt off and I saw those bullet scars. I know bullet scars because my own father had them. And you've never told us anything, which usually means there's something you aren't anxious to tell."

"I guess you're right." He tightened the girth on his saddle. "There ain't much to tell, though. I come west with my Pa, and he was a lunger. I drove the wagon myself after we left Independence. Clean to Caldwell, then on to Santa Fé. We got us a little outfit with what Pa had left, and some damn fellers stole it off us, and they killed Pa."

Joe Redlin rode back to join them as Johnny was swinging to the saddle. He turned and glanced down at the valley. "Reckon that range won't get much use, Johnny," he said, anxiously, "and the stock sure need it. Fair to middlin' grass, but too far to water."

"That draw, now," Johnny suggested, "I been thinkin' about that draw. It would take a sight of work, but a couple of good men with teams and some elbow grease could build them a dam across that draw. There's a sight of water comes down when it rains, and enough to last most of the

summer if it was dammed. Maybe even the whole year."

The three horses started walking toward the draw, and Johnny pointed out what he meant. "A feller over to Mobeetie did that one time," he said, "and it washed his dam out twice, but the third time she held, and he had him a little lake, all the year around."

"That's a good idea, Johnny." Redlin studied the setup, then nodded. "A right good idea."

"Sam and me could do it," Johnny suggested, avoiding Pa Redlin's eyes.

Pa Redlin said nothing, but Johnny and Else knew that Sam was not exactly ambitious about extra work. He was a good hand, Sam was, strong and capable, but he was big headed about things and was little inclined to sticking with a job.

"Reminds me," Pa said, glancing at the sun, "Sam should be back soon."

"He might stop in town," Else suggested, and was immediately sorry she had said it for she could see the instant worry on Redlin's face. The idea of Sam Redlin stopping at the Four Star with seven thousand dollars on him was scarcely a pleasant one. Murder had been done there for much, much less. And then Sam was over-confident. He was even cocky.

"I reckon I'd better ride in and meet him," Redlin said, genuinely worried now. "Sam's a good boy, but he sets too much store by himself. He figures he can take care of himself anywhere, but that pack of wolves . . ." His voice trailed off to silence.

Johnny turned in his saddle. "Why, I could just as well ride in, Pa," he said casually. "I ain't been to town for a spell, and if anything happened, I could lend a hand."

Pa Redlin was about to refuse, but Else said, "Let him go. Johnny's got a way with folks. Chances are he could get Sam back without trouble."

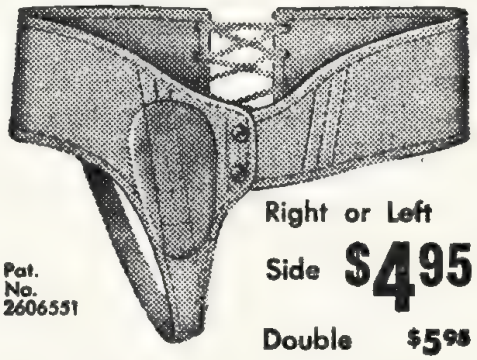
That's right! Johnny's thoughts were grim. Send me along to save your boy. You don't care if I get shot, just so's he's been saved. Well, all right, I'll go. When I come back I'll climb my gelding and light out. Up to

[Turn page]

RUPTURE-EASER

T.M. Reg. U.S. Pat. Off. (A Piper Brace Truss)

For MEN, WOMEN and CHILDREN



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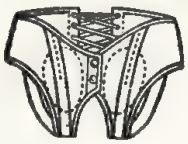

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Oregon. I never been to Oregon.

Flitch was in town. His mouth tightened a little, but at that, it would be better than Pa going. Pa always said the wrong thing, being outspoken like. He was a man who spoke his mind, and to speak one's mind to Flitch or Loss Degner would mean a shooting. It might be he could get Sam out of town all right. If he was drinking it would be hard. Especially if that redhead had her hands on him.

"You reckon you could handle it?" Pa asked doubtfully.

"Sure," Johnny said, his voice a shade hard, "I can handle it. I doubt if Sam's in any trouble. Later, maybe. All he'd need is somebody to side him."

"Well," Pa was reluctant, "better take your Winchester. My sixgun, too."

"You hang onto it. I'll make out."

JOHNNY TURNED the gelding and started back toward the ranch his eyes cold. Seventeen he might be, but four years on the frontier on your own make pretty much of a man out of you. He didn't want any more shooting, but he had six men dead on his back trail now, not counting Comanches and Kiowas. Six, and he was seventeen. Next thing they would be comparing him to the Kid to Wes Hardin.

He wanted no gunfighter's name, only a little spread of his own where he could run a few cows and raise horses, good stock, like some he had seen in East Texas. No range ponies for him, but good blood. That Sprague place now . . . but that was Sam's place, or as good as his. Well, why not? Sam was getting Else, and it was little enough he could do for Pa and Ma, to bring Sam home safe.

He left the gelding at the water trough and walked into the barn. In his room, out of a hiding place in the corner, he took his guns. After a moment's thought, he took but one, leaving the .44 Russian behind. With only one gun and the change in him, Flitch might not spot him at all.

Johnny was at the gate riding out when Else and Pa rode up. Else looked at him, her eyes falling to the gun at his hip. Her face was pale and her eyes large. "Be careful, Johnny. I had to say that because you know how hot-headed Pa is. He'd get killed, and he might get Sam killed."

That was true enough, but Johnny was aggrieved. He looked her in the eyes. "Sure, that's true, but you didn't think of Sam, now, did you? You were just thinking of Pa."

Her lips parted to protest, then her face seemed to stiffen. "No, Johnny, it wasn't only Pa I thought of. I did think of Sam. Why shouldn't I?"

That was plain enough. Why shouldn't she? Wasn't she going to marry him? Wasn't Sam getting the Sprague place when they got that money back safe?

He touched his horse lightly with a spur and moved on past her. All right, he would send Sam back to her, if he could. It was time he was moving on, anyway.

Sam's horse was tied at the Four Star's hitch-rail. The saddle-bags were gone. Johnny dismounted and turned quickly into the door.

Sam Redlin was sitting at a table with the redhead, the saddle-bags on the table before him, and he was drunk. He was very drunk. Johnny's eyes swept the room. The bartender and Loss Degner stood together, talking. Neither of them paid any attention to Johnny, for neither knew him. But Flitch did.

Flitch was standing down the bar with Albie Bower, but none of the old Gila outfit. Both of them looked up, and Flitch kept looking, never taking his eyes from Johnny. Something bothered him, and maybe it was the one gun.

Johnny moved over to Sam's table. They had to get out of here fast, before Flitch remembered. "Hi, Sam," he said, "just happened to be in town, and Pa said if I saw you, to side you on the way home."

Sam stared at him sullenly. "Side me? You?" He snorted his contempt. "I need no man to side me. You can tell Pa I'll be home later tonight." He glanced at the redhead. "Much later."

"Want I should carry this stuff home for you?" Johnny put his hand on the saddle-bags.

"Leave him be!" Hazel protested angrily. "Can't you see he don't want to be bothered? He's capable of takin' care of himself, an' he don't need no kid for gardeen!"

"Beat it," Sam said. "You go on home. I'll come along later."

"Better come now, Sam." Johnny was getting worried, for Loss Degner had started for the table.

"Here, you!" Degner was sharp. "Leave that man alone! He's a friend of mine, and I'll have no saddle tramp annoying my customers!"

Johnny turned on him. "I'm no saddle tramp. I ride for his Pa. He asked me to ride home with him—now. That's what I aim to do."

AS HE SPOKE he was not thinking of Degner, but of Flitch. The gunman was behind him now, and neither Flitch, fast as he was, nor Albie Bower were above shooting a man in the back.

"I said to beat it." Sam stared at him drunkenly. "Saddle tramp's what you are. Folks never should have took you in."

"That's it," Degner said. "Now get out! He don't want you nor your company."

There was a movement behind him, and he heard Flitch say, "Loss, let me have him. I know this hombre. This is that kid gunfighter, Johnny O'Day, from the Gila."

Johnny turned slowly, his green eyes flat and cold. "Hello, Flitch. I heard you were around." Carefully, he moved away from the table, aware of the startled look on Hazel's face, the suddenly tight awareness on the face of Loss Degner. "You lookin' for me, Flitch?" It was a chance he had to take. His best chance now. If shooting started, he might grab the saddle-bags and break for the door, and then the ranch. They would be through with Sam once the money was gone.

"Yeah," Flitch stared at him, his unshaven face hard with the lines of evil,

[Turn page]

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and shadowed by the intent that rode him, "I'm lookin' for you. Always figured you got off easy, made you a fast rep gunnin' down your betters."

Bower had moved up beside him, but Loss Degner had drawn back to one side. Johnny's eyes never left Flitch. "You in this, Loss?"

Degner shrugged. "Why should I be? I was no Gila River gunman. This is your quarrel, finish it between you."

"All right, Flitch," Johnny said, "you want it. I'm givin' you your chance to start the play."

The stillness of a hot midafternoon lay on the Four Star. A fly buzzed against the dusty, cobwebbed back window. Somewhere in the street a horse stamped restlessly, and a distant pump creaked. Flitch stared at him, his little eyes hard and bright. His sweat stained shirt was torn at the shoulder, and there was dust ingrained in the pores of his face.

His hands dropped in a flashing draw, but he had only cleared leather when Johnny's first bullet hit him, puncturing the Bull Durham tag that hung from his shirt pocket. The second shot cut the edge of it, and the third, fourth and fifth slammed Albie Bower back, knocking him back step by step, but Albie's gun was hammering, and it took the sixth shot to put him down.

Johnny stood over them, staring down at their bodies, and then he turned to face Loss Degner.

Degner was smiling, and he held a gun in his hand from which a thin tendril of smoke lifted. Startled, Johnny's eyes flickered to Sam Redlin.

Sam lay across the saddle-bags, blood trickling from the temples. He had been shot through the head by Degner under cover of the gun battle, murdered without a chance!

Johnny O'Day's eyes lifted to Loss Degner's. The saloon keeper was still smiling. "Yes, he's dead, and I've killed him. He had it coming, the fool! Thinking we cared to listen to his bragging! All we wanted was that money, and now we've got it. Me, Hazel and I! We've got it."

(Continued on page 96)

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"Not yet," Johnny's lips were stiff and his heart was cold. He was thinking of Pa, Ma and Else. "I'm still here."

"You?" Degner laughed. "With an empty gun? I counted your shots, boy. Even Johnny O'Day is cold turkey with an empty gun. Six shots, two for Flitch, and beautiful shooting, too, but four shots for Albie who was moving and shooting, not so easy a target. But now I've got you. With you dead, I'll just say Sam came here without any money, that he got shot during the fight. Sound good to you?"

Johnny still faced him, his gun in his hand. "Not bad," he said, "but you still have me here, Loss. And this gun ain't empty!"

Degner's face tightened, then relaxed. "Not empty? I counted the shots, kid, so don't try bluffing me. Now, I'm killing you." He tilted his gun toward Johnny O'Day, and Johnny fired, once, twice . . . a third time. As each bullet hit him, Loss Degner jerked and twisted, but the shock of the wounds and death wounds they were, was nothing to the shock of bullets from that empty gun.

He sagged against the bar, then slipped floorward.

"You can hear me, Loss?" Johnny said. "This ain't a six-shooter. It's a Walch twelve-shot Navy gun, thirty-six caliber. She's right handy, Loss, and it only goes to show you shouldn't jump to conclusions."

Hazel sat staring at the dying Degner. "You better go to him, Red," Johnny said. "He's only got a minute."

She stared at him as he picked up the saddle-bags and went out.

Russell, the storekeeper, was on the steps with a half dozen others, none of whom he knew. "Degner killed Sam Redlin," he said. "Take care of Sam, will you?"

At Russell's nod, Johnny swung to saddle and turned toward home.

He wouldn't leave now. He couldn't leave now. They would be all alone there, without Sam. Besides, Pa was going to need help on that dam. "Boy," he touched the gelding's neck, "I reckon we got to stick around for awhile."

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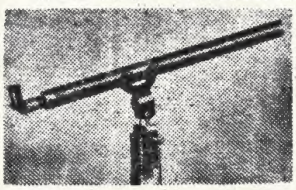

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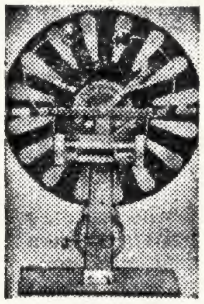

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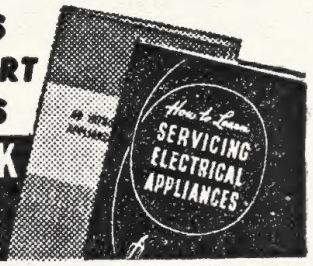

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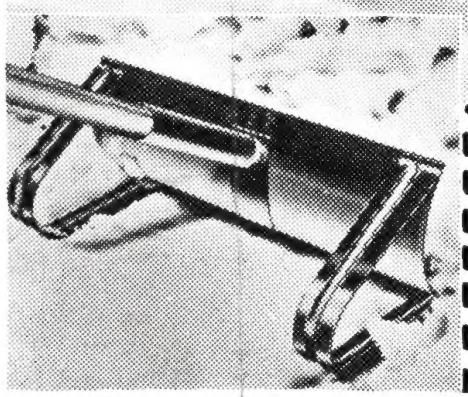

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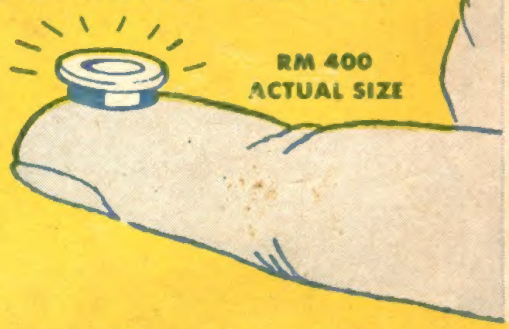

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